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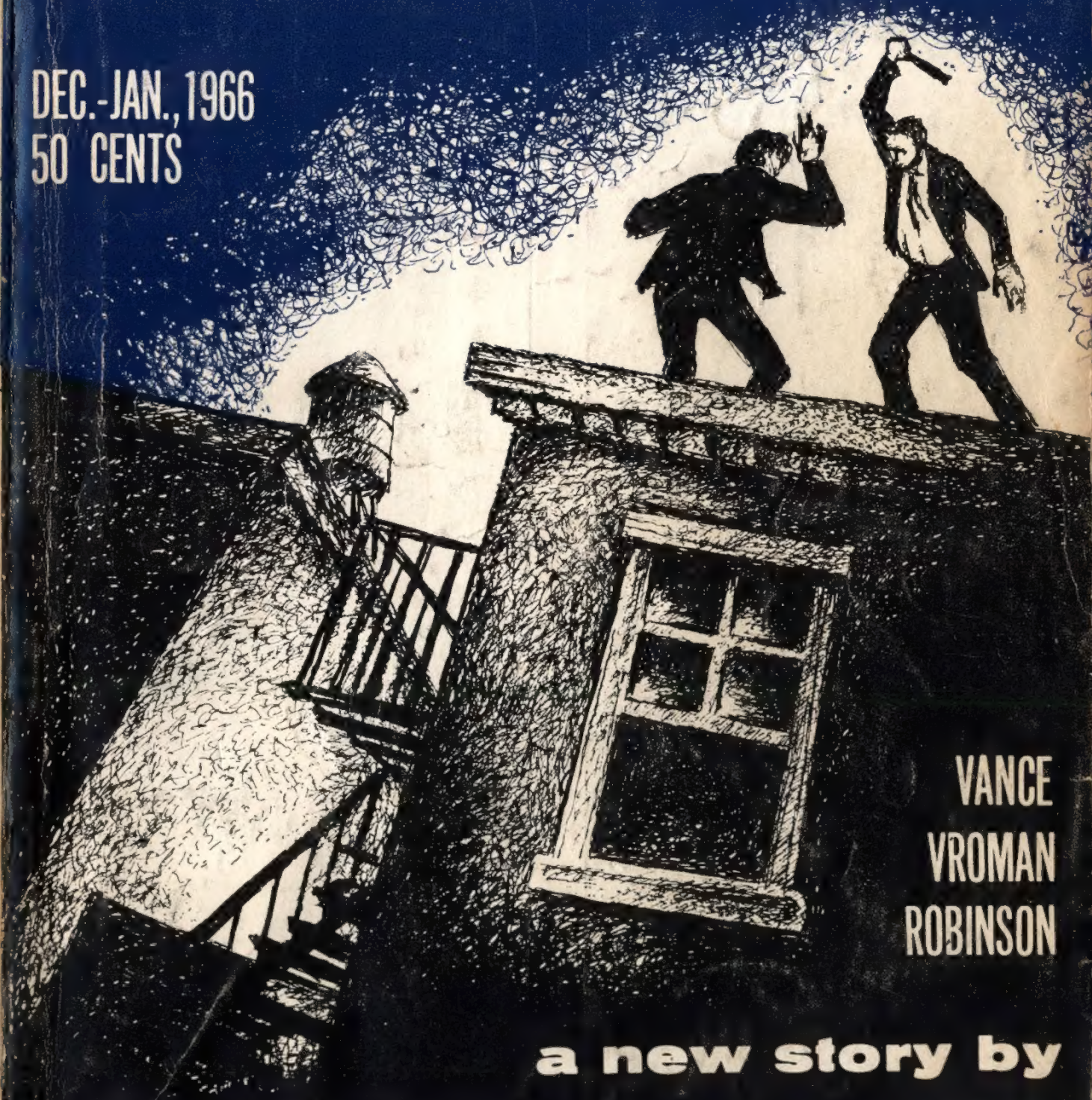

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MANHUNT

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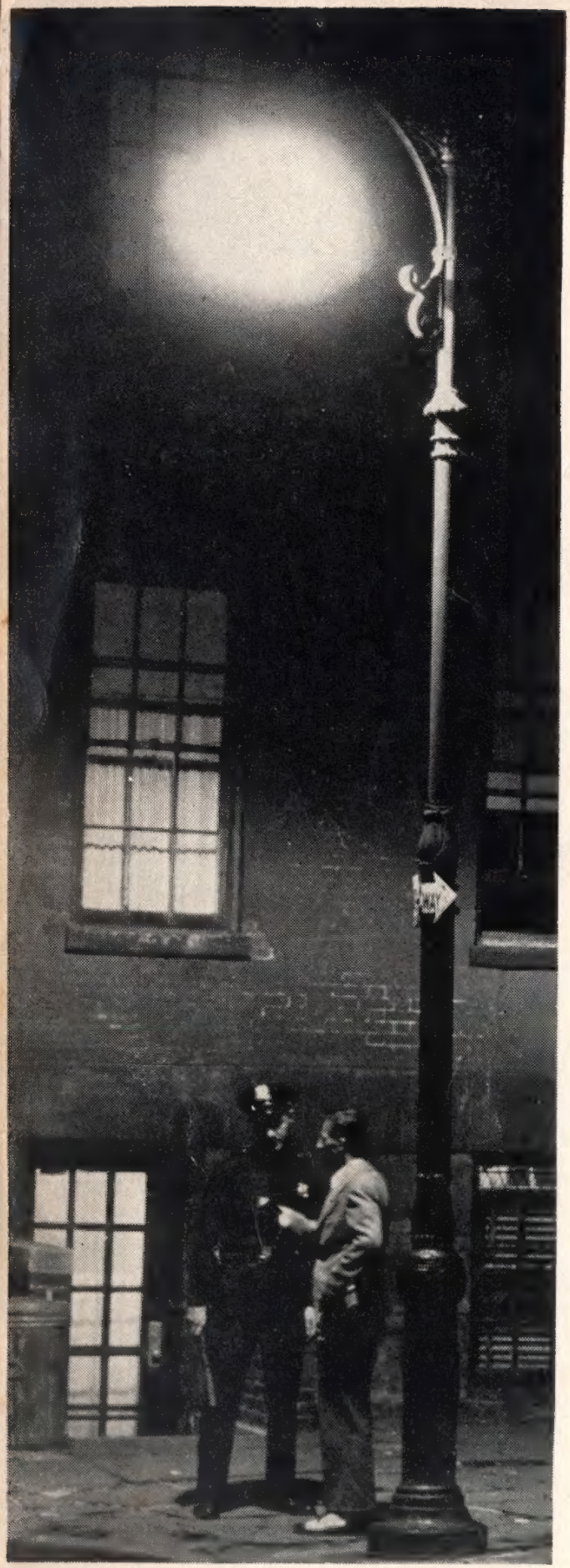

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GET MAN— HUNT

160 pages of MAYHEM MISCHIEF MURDER MALICE

see back cover

VOL. 14, NO. 6

MANHUNT

DEC.-JAN., 1966

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I LANDED at eleven thirty.

Outside Redcliff Aviation I watched the polished twelve foot Hamilton Standard coast to a stop, got out and went inside.

It was a nice flight office. Fireplace, lots of windows.

There was an instructor on the couch and a big blonde parked behind the desk. Her green dress looked expensive and it clung to her, hiding here, revealing there. She smiled and her voice was all tinkling bells and running streams. "May I help you?"

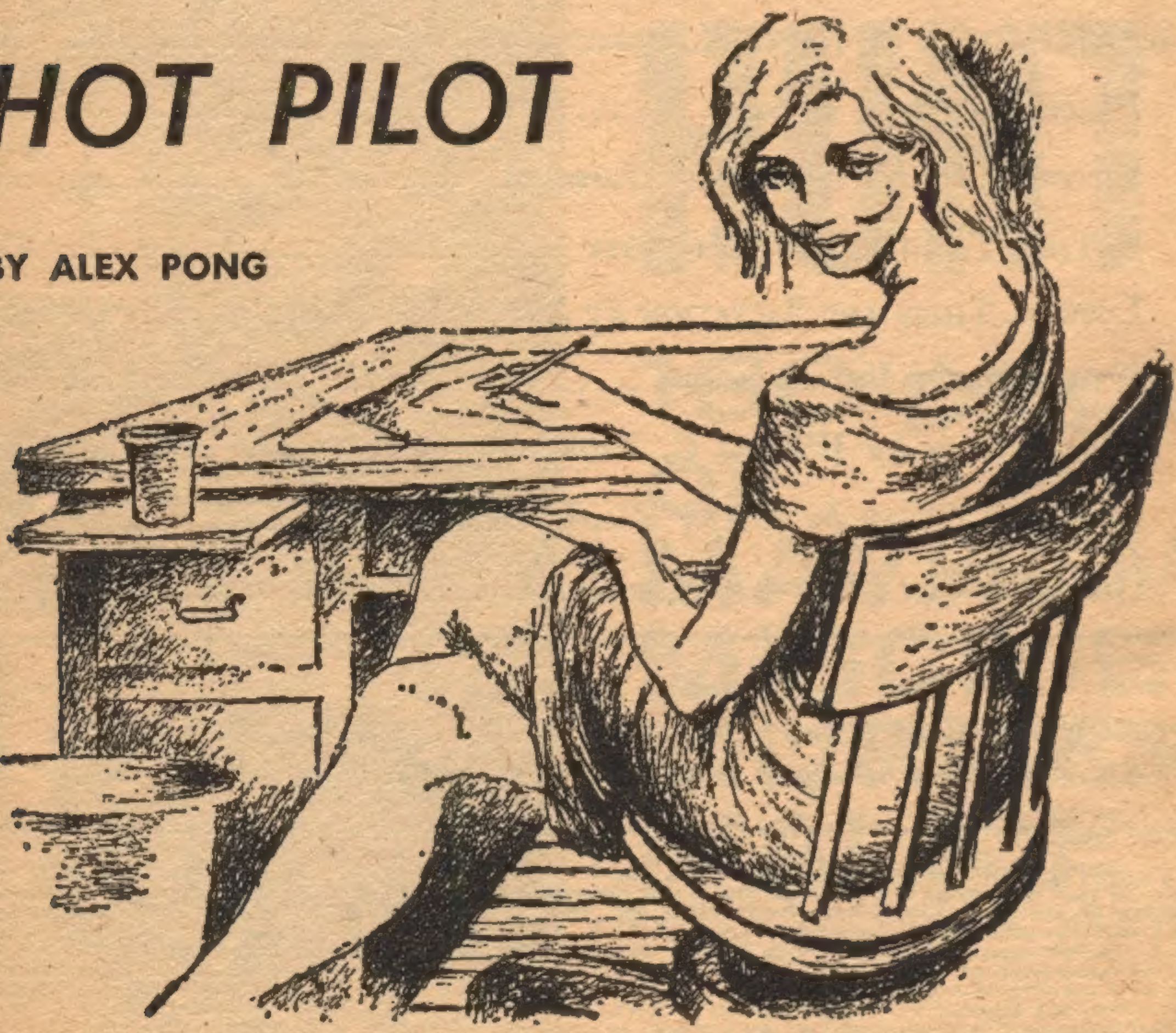
I looked up from the front of her dress hoping that things would not turn out the way I was afraid they would. She looked like a hell of a nice girl. I told her my name.

"Jeff Howard? Oh yes. The new flight instructor. Art said you'd be

The blonde was wild and blue-eyed . . . and his thoughts were way out yonder.

HOT PILOT

BY ALEX PONG



here. I'm Jill. Thats Jim Harlan on the couch there. He'll show you around."

So that's Harlan, I thought. I wondered how things were going to turn out for him. He stuck out his hand. "Nice to meet you Howard."

"Jim." The girl said.

He dropped the magazine and stood up. The look he gave her was not friendly. "Come on. I'll show you around."

On the flight line he looked at the Mustang, half smiled and looked at me. There was a curiously skeptical look in his eye. "So you're the new flight instructor." He looked up at the Mustang again and kicked the tire. "Married?"

I shook my head.

"You want to keep this job?"

"I wouldn't have taken it if I didn't want to keep it."

He looked at me. "No doubt. If you want to keep the job stay away from the girl. Otherwise you won't last a week."

"That so?"

He looked down at the ground and stretched out one arm along the wing. "Just giving you a little good advice."

"Why. Who is she?"

He slipped the question with one of his own. "Know how many flight instructors we've gone through here?"

I shook my head.

"Eight since I've been here. Her name's Jill Redcliff."

"Any relation . . . ?"

"Wife. Stay away from her or she'll have you pulling her pants off before you can even say stalled out. Last guy got mixed up with her just barely lived to regret it. Way it gets to me is that she tells Redcliff that the guy keeps bothering her. When Redcliff gets done with him he's no sight for sore eyes. You look like you got a few muscles, but you won't hold a candle to Redcliff."

"I'll try my utmost to resist her charms." There was sarcasm in my voice.

He looked at me. "It's your neck. If you want to put it in the noose go ahead. Just trying to give you some help."

"Yeah. Like maybe you're laying her on the side too?"

He looked at me as though I'd sprouted a second head. "Car wreck three years ago Howard. Got a guard rail right between the legs. She knows it. So does he. Thats how I come to have been here as long as I have." He was studying the airplane. "Way I hear it she came from the wrong side of the tracks. Dirty filthy grovelling crawling poor. Know what I mean?"

I said I did.

"He thinks she married him for love. Love my rear. She married him for money."

"I take it Redcliff doesn't know whats going on."

Harlan spat. "Man gets hooked he don't see nothing he don't want to see. She's his pride and joy. Eight flight instructors can come and go.

All of them get involved with her and you'd think he'd maybe begin to see there's something wrong, but does he. Ah ah. Some of them he beats up. Some of them leave in a big hurry. One power dives his way in. Every time we get a new set of pants around here she goes after it. You see the way she looked at you in there? Take your aerial hot rod and lam. Forget you ever answered his ad. I'll tell him you looked around and didn't like the lay-out."

I shook my head. It was hard to keep my mind off her smile, her golden hair.

"Yeah. Well don't say I didn't warn you." He waved his hand. "The Apache, Bonanza, and the two Cessnas are ours. Anything you want to know?" He glanced up at the Mustangs chrome stacks, then at me as if to ask how a flight instructor could afford it. "The keys to the planes are on the board beside the desk. Take the time off the tachs. Jill will give you a key to the office. Okay?"

I said everything was clear.

"Redcliff should be around in a bit. I'm going to lunch." He took his arm from the wing and started for the parking lot.

I turned towards the office. Jill had come out and was studying my airplane. I smiled and walked across the ramp.

Her shape was flawless. She moistened her lips. "Thats a beautiful airplane you have. What is it?"

"Surplus F-51D."

"Do you think a girl could ever fly something like that?"

"You fly?"

"Fifty five hours. When any of the instructors has spare time I go up." She followed me inside. "I suppose Jim told you all sorts of horrible things about me."

"Some."

She sighed. "He's impotent you know."

"Yeah. Automobile accident he said."

She nodded. "He's so terribly soured on things now."

I said I guessed he was.

She sat at the desk. "Tell me about yourself."

I wanted to walk over and kiss her. "Not much to tell."

We made small talk until Art Redcliff came in. He stopped in the doorway almost completely filling it. He was maybe a hair over six feet. Thick, he had to weigh two twenty at least. Perhaps a few ounces of it was fat. Maybe even a whole pound.

In his office we discussed my contract. It was a contract totally unlike Harlan's, but then he didn't have to know. After a bit he said he'd other business and left.

It was a week before anything came up.

I'd just landed and after the student left I went inside. Redcliff was standing at the window. Jill was parked in her usual spot.

I put away the key and dumped some approach plates on the coun-

ter. Redcliff turned. "That it for today?"

I looked at the schedule. "Appears to be."

"You flown your hot rod lately? Two seat conversion isn't it?"

I said it was.

"Jill's been pestering me to get you to take her up. I'll buy the gas if you want to take her."

I looked at Jill. She was wearing a dress with a high neckline but it didn't hide the thrust of full breasts, or the slimness of her waist. I said it was all right with me and smiled to try to lighten whatever it was that had made the air suddenly charged.

Redcliff had turned back to the window. "Jill wants a plane like yours for her own. First she'll have to learn how to fly one."

"Right."

"What will you want to train her in? T-6?"

I nodded. "Thats probably best."

Jill stood, picked up her purse and I watched the faint twitch of her buttocks as she walked across the room.

Redcliff glanced at her then returned his stare to the runways. "Theres a six for sale down at Howell. If it's okay, buy it." He brought out a roll, peeled off the rubber band and selecting two fifties, held them out. "This will take care of a deposit." He peeled off another fifty. "This will take care of your gas won't it?"

I said it would.

"Harlan should be here any minute." He said. "You can go as soon as he gets here."

When he showed up he wasn't sure what was going on, but he could gather that Jill and I were going flying. While Jill was out admiring my airplane and Redcliff was in his private office he found time to give me a pitying look. "You're in bad trouble kid. She's got the hook in. I can tell." He said softly.

I half smiled and started out.

"Sucker." He whispered.

Up on the wing she wanted to know how to get in.

"Like so." I said. "You press the little button, dig your fingers into the crack and roll the canopy back thus."

She pulled up her dress to get in just as she'd had to in getting up on the wing and again I couldn't look away. Her legs were long and tapered and the skin looked baby soft.

When she was in I bent to help with the shoulder harness. My hand brushed against her and it was as I'd expected. It was all her and not just Maidenform.

When we landed at Howell her face was flushed with excitement. It was no wonder. First she'd wanted to know what a loop was like, then a roll, and by the time I was done I'd done every aerobatic I knew.

The T-6 was a good one so I gave the guy a hundred to hold it and we were ready to go.

She was sitting in the shade be-

neath the wing. "Was it any good?"

"I bought it."

She looked into my eyes. "I won't have any trouble learning to fly it will I?"

"I doubt it."

She patted the ground. "We don't need to rush. Art has a business appointment this evening." She smiled. "We're going to have alot of fun together aren't we Jeff?"

"I guess so." There was double meaning in the question.

"You're afraid to be alone with me aren't you. You've been listening to Jim again. I can tell."

I stood where I was. "Yes. Jim has a vivid imagination. He has these hallucinations. He imagines that eight flight instructors have come and gone since he's been here. His twisted mind thinks that your husband even worked a few of them over. And of all the crazy things he thinks that one of them committed suicide."

"What does all that have to do with me Jeff?"

"Most of them got involved with you. One way or another."

"So says Jim."

"Didn't they?"

"Sit down and I'll tell you about it.

I sat.

"See. I don't bite. Which one would you like to hear about. The one who dove in? His wife ran around like a rabbit. I let Harry talk his troubles out with me. I should have known he'd fall in love with me and shut it off at the start, but I couldn't because he was as unhappy as I once was. I let him cry on my shoulder. Literally. Only after the tears dried up his lips were on my neck and his hand on my you know whats. He said he loved me. I told him I wasn't going to drop a MAN for a cry baby kid. He said he'd commit suicide if I didn't run away with him. In Jims warped mind I led him on and made him do it. If I did lead him on it wasn't the way Jim thinks it was. He told you I was once a tramp didn't he?"

I nodded.

Her eyes never wavered as she looked into mine. "One night Art came along and it was different. It had meaning. It was something beautiful." She paused. "I can explain the rest too. Like the one Art worked over. Tilford was the I can make any dame there is type. Jim fixed things for him, not me, by telling Tilford what a slut I was. By the time Tilford got done listening to Jim he figured force was the way to make me. He caught me in the hangar and said if I spread for all the others I was going to spread for him. He digs out a ten and says to spread. I broke away and ran into Arts office, locked myself in and called Art."

"Guess he had it coming then didn't he."

"Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever live down my past." She hesitated. "Jim's the trouble spot around here

not me Jeff. I try to tell Art we should get rid of him, but . . ." She shrugged. "I guess he's a good instructor." She paused and when she spoke again there was a sudden urgency in her voice. "Jeff something has to be done about Jim. There's been trouble and there's going to be more. Even Art's beginning to listen to him."

"We'd better go." I said.

The next day we flew down in one of the Cessnas.

I beat her back by twenty minutes. As I taxied in Harlan was getting ready to go out with another student. When he saw me he told the student something and started towards me. I set the parking brake and pulled back the mixture.

As the propeller came to a stop he climbed up on the wing and came alongside. "Why don't you back off while you can. Take her up and give her a bad time. Keep her nervous so she can't fly it. Maybe she'll give up and leave you alone." He looked over at his student. "I don't want to see you spin in kiddo."

"I won't."

He jumped down off the wing.

When Jill landed there was a gusty crosswind, but she held a wing down, carried it in with power and greased it on. When she came in she wanted to know how she'd done.

"Fine. The six won't give you any trouble."

"Lets go fly it then."

"Now?"

"Why not?"

I soloed her three hours later.

Harlan was alone when I walked in. "At least you're safe in that thing." He said. "With four feet of instrument panel between you there isn't much either of you can do. About all she can do is play with the stick. I always did wonder why they called it a joystick."

"Very funny." I said.

He picked up a magazine. "Learns easy doesn't she."

I said she did. "Tilford was the tough guy type wasn't he?"

He turned a page. "You might call him that."

"The I can make any dame there is type?"

"Maybe. You had to know him 'fore you noticed it. Guy had a massive ego. Figured he was indestructible."

"The kid who augured in had a bad marriage didn't he."

"Not until SHE came along." He flipped another page. "Where did you pick up all this?"

"Jill."

There was a roar as Jill poured on the coal.

He put down his magazine and stood. "I'll be a Chinese ace. Don't trust her kid. No matter what don't trust her. See you around." He sauntered out a genuinely puzzled look on his face.

Jill learned how to handle the two and a half ton plane like a pro, spending three or more hours a

day in the air. Every time she went up I had to help her with her chute and I told myself that it was my imagination telling me that while I was fastening buckles she was filling my hands with breast or firm tapering thigh, but I didn't believe it. I was getting so I was all thumbs.

At the end of the week she was ready for a fifty one.

It was just after sunset. The blue dome of the sky was tinted red across the west. We'd spent two hours working out the old trainer and if she wasn't tired I was. I climbed from the rear and walked up the wingwalk.

The manifolds tink tinked in the still air.

Maybe she was a bitch, but it wasn't bitch that said, "There's something special up there isn't there Jeff."

I nodded and reached down for the buckles my face only inches from hers.

Then suddenly her lips were on mine and I would have straightened but I was tired, more tired than I knew from two weeks of pretending that she was no more than another student instead of unbelievably desirable woman. I grabbed for the parachute harness and found her breast instead. Quickly I felt for the release and straightened. "Don't make trouble Jill." I helped her out.

Beside me she said softly. "I didn't plan it this way Jeff. I swear it."

Inside I dumped the chutes on the couch and went to the file for her log. She took a comb and went into the womens room.

She came out with a new face. "Read the note?"

"What note?"

"On the desk."

I reached for the note. Art had borrowed her car for a visiting friend and Jim was to take her home.

"You can take me." She said.

"The note is for Jim." I said.

"He's gone." She looked at me. "Afraid to be alone with me?"

In the car she sat over on her side of the seat. When she spoke she wanted to know if I was angry.

I said I wasn't.

"Jeff. Jim has to go."

I grunted.

"Jeff. Everything's going to hell. Art gets snappier and more irritable every day. Jim's poisoning his mind."

I said there wasn't anything I could do and we rode on in silence. Finally, she changed the subject. "That was quite a kiss wasn't it."

I said that that was something best forgotten.

"Why? Are you a woman hater too. Like Jim?"

"Maybe." It wasn't any of her business.

Her voice was soft. "Don't be. A man who hates women or a woman who hates men lives in a special kind of hell regular people never know. Believe me."

I wasn't sure it was the right thing to tell her but the truth was

boiling up. "Don't tell me about that kid. I've been there and back. I was married once. In Korea we weren't allowed to have our dependents, but Nita got around that by getting herself involved with CARE. American girls were scarce and pretty ones even scarcer. It made me proud having people ogle her, but trouble was she liked to run around. We'd worked three years to have a kid, but no kid. Doctor said there was nothing wrong with either of us. She figured it was my fault." I was too wound up to stop. "Divorce wasn't her way. She had to hang around and throw it in my face I guess. HE was an army helicopter pilot. Everyone on the base knew Army and Nita were making it. Then Army had to get himself killed. My fault of course. That was in the early days when we were still flying fifty ones. One of the fellows had his engine shot out and bailed out over enemy ground. I was the only one with fuel enough to fly cover. A chopper comes fluttering along and who does it have to be but Army. So who cares. Groundfire starts coming up and I start in to quiet it down. All of a sudden there is one of those loud silences in the cockpit. Everything checks out okay except that the engine isn't running. I turn towards friendly ground, pull back the prop control to stretch the glide. There is an open area not far ahead and I decide not to bail out. The enemy likes to shoot at parachutes. A hundred feet off I jettison the canopy. Then there is a sputtering and coughing. Then a roar. I slap the prop control forward, throttle wide open and I am climbing. I look back at operation rescue and there is a fire burning. Army is nowhere in sight. I head for the barn because the engine is beginning to roughen, but by the time I near the base everything is fine. When I land the mechanics can find nothing wrong with it. No dirt in the fuel system, no bad mag wires. Everything checks out perfectly. That happens. Ask any pilot, but it doesn't look good because it is common knowledge about Army and Nita and now Army is conveniently dead.

"So we hold an inquiry. The ground fire was bad. Did I chicken out maybe, especially knowing that Army is flying the chopper and here is a chance to knock off my wife's lover. They ask me to resign my commission and send me back to the states. Nita of course finds that her job is over and comes back with me.

"I resigned my commission. I picked up a private investigator's license and knocked around at that for awhile since I was a cop before I went in the air force. It paid good, but it was all divorce work. Once in awhile a little inter-industry espionage. I gave it up and found a job flight instructing. One day a man came in looking for someone with F-51 time. He'd located a dozen of them in South America and

if I would go get them I could keep one for my troubles.

"I kept out the fourth one and some friends around the field helped me get it licensed. I was pretty happy. Nita was finally pregnant and things were pretty well settled down. Then I found out it wasn't my kid. I just up and left her. Two years later I got the divorce. So I don't hold too much for unfaithful women Jill."

"I can see why."

"Yeah. So if suddenly you think maybe you're in love with me instead of Art, think it over careful before you do anything. As I said. I've been there and back. I'm not about to take another flying leap with my eyes shut."

Outside Redcliff's she moved across the seat and planted her lips on mine. A moment later she broke the kiss. "You're a loser too aren't you. I thought you were. I could see it in your eyes that first day." She sighed. "If you get lonesome or something, ever, and need to talk, I'll be waiting." She placed her lips on mine again and I wanted to wrap my arms around her.

"Art's out of town Jeff."

I shook my head. "It's not too late to forget all this. Go away."

She brushed my lips with hers. "You want to forget that?" She left.

At my apartment I made a call then an hour later I went back. She must have known I was going to come back because she answered the door immediately.

"I came back." I said.

"Get lonesome Jeff?"

I shrugged. "Somehow you don't seem the type." I went inside and stopped by the fireplace.

She watched me. "Don't seem what type?"

"Maybe I've just got a dirty-mind. I thought that the implication was clear that if I came back we could . . ." I let my voice trail off. "It's been a long time Jill. What do we do. Rush into each others embrace. Or do I carry you into the bedroom like a new bride. And why me incidentally. What's wrong with Art? He's got money, power, status. What more could you want?"

"Don't talk so loud Jeff."

"Am I talking loud. I didn't notice." I nearly yelled.

It was kind of ludicrous really.

We stared at each other for a bit. "Did you want to talk about something Jeff?"

I sighed. "Not unless you want to wrap yourself up in a rug or something. You know you're beautiful I suppose. I can see why Art married you."

"Let's not talk about him."

I walked across the room. "Don't we go into the bedroom so we can climb in between nice clean white sheets."

"If thats what you want."

I stopped and quite awkwardly put one hand on her breast. She reached up and covered my hand.

We stood that way for a little, then I took my hand from beneath hers

and undid the top button of her blouse. She didn't do anything so I undid the rest of the buttons, moved closer and untucked the blouse. The wispy bra offered only minimal support. I slipped the blouse down off her shoulders. She turned so that I could unhook the bra. I slipped the bra off and she turned. "Like them Jeff." She moved closer.

A moment later I picked her up and carried her into the bedroom. All things considered it was pretty good. All three times.

Afterwards I got out of bed and dressed.

"I love you Jeff. I knew I was going to fall in love with you the minute you walked into the office."

"Sure."

"What are you going to do now."

"I'm going to go back and pack, write a letter to Art and leave it at the office. Then I'm going to throw my little bag in my airplane and head for I don't know where." I jerked my tie tight and inspected myself in the mirror. I sat down on the edge of the bed and began to put on my shoes.

"You're just going to leave me?"

I nodded.

She was quiet while I wiggled my foot into a sock. "You're not going to do any such thing Jeff."

"Oh?"

"You love me Jeff. You know you do. You're going to come to me whenever I want you, because you want me too. Don't you?" She said hopefully.

I shrugged and pulled my laces tight.

"Jeff."

"What."

"I could make things very bad for you. Art's jealous. He'd hunt you down wherever you were."

I stood. "Looks like I might stay doesn't it?"

"Looks that way dear."

"Why Jill. What do you want out of me?"

"Escape Jeff. Together we can rob him blind. Why do you think all those others before you left. They didn't have enough stomach to keep it up. Some of them left because they were afraid they'd get involved, not because they were. Tilford? When I asked him to start taking more cash on the company credit cards he balked. So I waited until the right time and rigged a rape scene. It wasn't pretty what Art did to him."

"You were picking up cash whenever you bought gas at another airport?" I said.

She nodded. "Here too. You can make a lot that way over the years. I don't fly enough but you instructors do."

"What else do you do?"

"Art gives me whatever I say I need to run the place and pay the bills. A few dollars extra here and there. It all adds up. I've got quite a little nest egg stored up."

"Why?"

"I didn't marry him for love you fool. I married him for his money

and I'm going to get enough of it to set me up for life before I ditch him and go somewhere where they don't know my past.

"Art is going to discover you someday Jill."

"He's too stupid Jeff. I've taken him for over ten grand and only just begun. Work with me. Please. I don't want to see him hurt you." She paused. "But of course, if I have to . . .".

"Do I have a choice?"

She smiled then. "No."

"Art didn't get where he is by being stupid. Someday. . . ." I said.

She sat up with a cool smile and lit a cigarette. Being nude didn't seem to bother her. "He's blind when it comes to me Jeff."

I sighed. "His love blinded him and you played on it didn't you. You blackmailed them, and got away with it because Art wouldn't believe anything bad about you. The kid you could double blackmail because he was married."

"Of course," she rose and began to dress.

She was buttoning her blouse when Art walked in. Her face fell. Quickly she backed into a corner.

I watched her, then looked at Art. "Get it all?"

He nodded. "No fool like an old fool Jeff. I was blind for a long time."

"Happens to the best of us."

"Art?" Her voice had risen. "Don't believe him. He forced his way in here. I had to. . . ."

He sighed and despite all his power he was a tired old man then. "Don't Jill. It's all on tape."

Her eyes darted towards me. "You're no flight instructor. You're in cahoots with him." Her eyes tracked towards Art.

"That's why I didn't come in when you invited me. I had to call Art first." I looked at Art. "She comes through with an occasional pearl. Men who hate women and women who hate men live in a special kind of hell. Things like that. I was almost ready to start blaming it all on Jim."

Art nodded. "He kept telling me she was making a monkey out of me Jeff."

"Keep him around." I looked at Jill. "The man that came to the airport looking for someone with F-51 time was Art. Sometime ago he thought you weren't quite on the level and wrote to me since he knew I was once a private dick." I put a hand on Art's shoulder. "Take it easy Art." I left then and went off to pack.

When I finally got down to the airport I found her huddled by the tail. She came out of the shadows and there was a hollow look in her eyes. I couldn't see any marks on her.

"He'll kill me Jeff. Take me with you. Anywhere."

I shook my head and climbed up on the wing.

"Please Jeff. I'll do anything. . . ."

I looked down at her. "You made

your bed. Lie in it." I rolled back the canopy tossed my bag in the rear and slipped into the front.

She clawed her way up on the wing and beat on the canopy while I went through my check list. I switched on my radio and called the tower. "Ground control. Mustang three three four delta Redcliff Aviation. There's a woman here trying to keep me from starting up. Would you send the airport patrol around?"

"Wilco three three four delta."

"Thank you ground. Out." I switched off the radio then and sat there holding the canopy shut until I saw the flashing red light atop the airport patrol stop a short distance away. They shone a spot on her and she collapsed on the wing, weeping uncontrollably.

I wanted to tell her as Art had told me earlier, that he would never stop loving her, that even with his suspicions proved true he would simply forgive her and try to talk her into starting all over again. But that was for him to tell her. It wasn't any of my affair any more.

I knew what I would do with her.

When they had her safely in the patrol car I started the engine, switched on the radio and thumbed the mike again. "Ground. Three three delta again. Thanks and ready to taxi."

"Roger. Taxi north runway one nine. Wind south southwest eight. Time three zero greenwich. Altimeter. . . ." The voice was pleasantly bored and uncaring. I released the brakes then and let the ten thousand pound fighter begin to roll.

Give ...so more will live

HEART FUND

They were an unlikely pair. George was nervous, frightened, with no stomach for danger. Proctor was hard, practical . . . and he knew that George would prove a most accommodating partner.

THE RECLUSE

BY JAMES R. FRANZ

The khaki-clad hunters drove carefully, silently, over the East Texas hill country, their headlights a civilized companion to the deep-rutted road through the trees and a glaring intrusion to the darkness.

"Are you sure about the mileage, Proctor?" asked the smaller man in the new shirt with the store crease. "It seems like we've been driving for hours." His face was thin and very white above the dark khaki.

"We've been going pretty slow," answered the driver. "This country can fool you at night. We haven't gone as far as you might think." He was dressed similar to his passenger, but the light jacket he wore was faded and fit comfortably.

"Yeah?" said the smaller man. "Well, I still think we ought to have started before it got so dark. I don't want to get stranded out here. The gage is almost on empty."

"Don't worry, George. I've been over this road three times now. We're almost there."

They continued in silence through the audible wilderness inhabited by night migrants, passing a bridge made of hand-cut timbers, and started down an eroded hill. The headlights dimmed momentarily when they ran out of gas. The driver eased the car out of gear and coasted to a stop in front of an ageing, weathered house.

"Is this the place where the old man lives?" asked George.

"This is it. You can hear the dogs now."

The animals came from the porch and the blackness at the side of the leaning structure, barking and circling the car. One, a large grey beast, leaped against the side, scratching the paint and chewing at the strange scent on the door.

"Would you look at that," shouted George, moving away from the closed window toward the center of the seat. "Man, you couldn't pay me to get out of this car."

Proctor watched the dogs and then turned on the spotlight, directing the beam over the yard, across the porch to the screen door. He blinked the light several times, turned it off, and waited.

"Doesn't he know we're out here?"

"If he doesn't, George, there's something wrong with him."

The dogs stopped barking and jumping. The youngest hound, disinterested, ran across the road into the brush. Another wagged his tail sociably and politely sniffed each tire. Only the grey stood sentinel. He planted himself before the gate, lips pulled back from his teeth, tense, poised toward the intruders.

The men watched the grey warrior and the darkened house, both immobil in the faint night-light, until Proctor pointed to a darker form coming across the fenced yard. "There he is," he said.

The man moved across the yard in quick strides, his gun held loosely at his side, and finally stopped near a large tree. "What do you want here?" he called.

Proctor rolled the window partially down and shouted to the tall figure in overalls, "We're out of gas. Can you sell us some gas?"

"There ain't no gas around here."

"I figured that much," said Proctor. "Where's the nearest place we can get some?"

"What're you doing roaming around so late?"

"We're supposed to be hunting. We got lost after dark."

"Well, I ain't got no gas."

"What do you think we ought to do? Sit here all night?"

The tall man walked to the side of the car, looked at the assorted equipment and the guns in the back, and opened the door and sat down beside the gear with his own shotgun across his lap. He filled his pipe from a small can of tobacco and when he had lit it he looked up at the two men in the front.

"You by yourselves?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean any your folk around here."

"No, Mr. Tate. We came over from Houston this afternoon to hunt. I've got a new rifle I want to try out."

Henry Tate moved the shotgun from his lap toward Proctor's face. "How'd you know my name, Mister?" he demanded.

"Tate?" answered Proctor. "It's right over there on the mailbox."

"You got a hunting license?"

Henry Tate took the offered wallet, looked at the stamped green papers, and made a decision. He got out of the car and walked to the gate, turned, and called to the dogs. "Get back in the yard. Go on. Get!" He looked at the men and motioned to them. "Well, get out if

you're going to. I'll put you up until morning. You can walk back to the highway in the morning."

Two of the dogs hurried to the back of the house, but the grey slipped past Tate and lunged toward the men as they opened the doors.

"Get back, Skinner! Damn your hide. Mind me!" He poked at the animal with his shotgun, but did not kick at him as he had the others. Skinner ran to the porch and through the screen door into the house.

"You all go on in the house with your stuff," he said. "I'm going out back a minute. Watch the porch. There's some loose boards."

Henry Tate watched George struggle with a large bag on his shoulder and the rifles held clumsily under his arm. He shook his head. "Hey, Dude," he called. "You might just be real careful where you put those feet of yours. There's rattlers up there sometimes, too."

George stepped from the porch and started back to the gate. "To heck with," he said. "I'll stay in the car."

Proctor intercepted him with another bag and led him up the steps into the house. They could hear the dog, Skinner, in the other room.

"Looks like he could have had the decency to at least light a lamp in here," said George. "You can't see anything."

"I'll light one," said the old man. George and Proctor turned toward the unexpected sound. The old man struck a match on his shotgun and placed it to a wick, filling the room with yellow light and shadows. Proctor stared at the old man's half-illuminated face.

"Are you trying to scare us, Mr. Tate? he asked.

Henry Tate returned the steady appraisal. Neither Tate nor Proctor looked away until the old man nodded approvingly and turned to the kitchen. "I got coffee on the stove," he said. "Do you want a cup?"

Proctor followed him into the low-roofed extension of the main house and George stepped after them. The old man poured the hot liquid from a pot into once-white cups, and they sat without talking around the table.

"People ever stop here to see you?" asked Proctor.

"Why?" replied the old man.

"I don't know. No reason in particular. You just act like you're not used to people."

Henry Tate looked at Proctor, lit his pipe, and laughed. "Man, you sure do speak your mind, don't you? Nope, I guess I ain't. Not many people come around here anymore. Some like him stop sometimes," he said, pointing at George. "Not many real hunters, though."

"Haven't you got a family?"

"Got the dogs," he said, nodding towards Skinner. "Had a family once. A wife and a kid, a girl. The woman died a long time ago and the girl just up and left one day."

"You don't ever hear from her?"

"Nope. But she'll come back sometime."

Proctor and the old man talked. They smoked from the mixture in the old man's tin and talked about dogs and guns and long winters. They enjoyed each other until the lamp began to smoke and the old man got up and refilled it. "There's only one bed that's any good," he said. "You all take it. I doze a lot daytimes, and you got a long walk in the morning." He pointed down the hall to the room and gave a lamp to Proctor. "There's more cover in the closet, if you need it."

Proctor led George down the hall to the room and closed the door behind them. They stacked the gear on a small plank bench by the window and looked about the room. It was impossible to decipher the original pattern of the faded wallpaper. Large, dark water stains covered the ceiling and the top of the walls. One spot, near the bed, was marred by countless streaks where the old man had struck matches.

"What's next?" asked George.

"We wait."

"I'm not getting into his bed," protested George. "Let's get out of here. It's stupid to stay in this house. There isn't any telling what that old codger will do."

"It's all right," said Proctor. "The old fellow is just being careful. He doesn't know how to act around people. Probably a little scared, too."

"Scared! If anybody around here is scared, it's me. I'm for getting out of here right now."

"Take it easy, George. I mean it. Everything is all right. You're getting excited over nothing."

Proctor sat down in a frame chair that had been covered years ago with rawhide and quietly surveyed the room where Henry Tate slept. He took a cigarette from his jacket, lit it, and leaned back in the chair with his eyes closed. George watched him, and thought he was going to fall asleep, but every few minutes he would lift the cigarette to his lips without opening his eyes. "George," he said, finally. "That old man makes a good a cup of coffee as I ever tasted," and then he got out of the chair and washed his face and hands in a small enamel basin on the dresser. He started to dry on a towel draped over a nail on the wall, but changed his mind and took one from the zipper bag on the bench.

"George, I'm going outside and see what he's doing. You stay here. Do you hear me? You get him scared and there really isn't any telling what he will do. Just take it easy. And stay here."

George listened to Proctor walk down the hall and then he moved over to the chair that Proctor had just left. He began smoking and waiting. He thought he heard a door slam, and the dogs began to bark. He tried to listen for other sounds, but he could only hear the dogs. Ten minutes! He was almost

certain he had heard a noise down the hall. He went to the closed door and placed his ear against it. "Proctor?" he called.

The dogs began running around the house. He hurried to the bench where the rifles were stacked, found his, and checked the safety. He opened the door and looked down the dark hall. "Proctor?" he called. "Proctor!"

He started down the silent hall with his rifle held shield-like in front of himself, his finger on the trigger. "I'll never get out of here," he moaned. "It was stupid to come here." He almost sagged to the floor, saw Proctor move in the kitchen, and hurried to him.

"Proctor!"

"Yeah, George."

"Have you already got the old man?"

"Yeah, George. George, I saw you in the hall. Do you think you've got enough guts to go out there and shoot the dogs?"

"Where's that mean one?"

"He's running around outside. I shut the door when the old man came back in."

"Did you find the money?"

"I found it. He was fixing to move it outside. Will you go on out and shoot the dogs? And after you've shot them, drag their carcasses on the porch."

"On the porch?"

"On the porch, George. Do it. And fill the car with the cans in the trunk. Put both cans in the tank. I don't want to stop after I leave here."

Proctor took the rest of the money from the wood box near the stove and stuffed it into a canvas bag. There was a lot of money. A lot more than she had thought. Proctor stopped working when he heard the two shots. He listened for the third and fourth, and, satisfied, returned to his business. Henry Tate moved his arm slightly toward his head and Proctor walked over to him and hit him again with the piece of wood from the box.

George came into the kitchen covered with perspiration. His voice was almost shrill. "Let's hurry," he laughed. "We better get out of here quick. Somebody might have heard all those shots."

"Take it easy, George. There's just nobody around. Have you put the dogs on the porch?" George nodded, and slumped into a chair by the table. "That big dog damned near got me," he said. "I had to shoot him twice."

"Don't sit down, George. I've got a few things left to do. I'll get the rest of the money. You put everything in the car. Have you filled it? Well, go on outside and fill it."

Proctor took one of the kerosene lamps from the shelf and dropped it to the floor. He stepped back as the glass broke, and watched the liquid spread across the dry floor, turning it dark and clean. He remembered the cups and took the one he had used from the three on the table,

wiped it clean with a damp rag, and placed it in the cabinet. He left the kitchen and went to the screen door and watched George. He looked at his watch. Thirty minutes after the shots. Only twenty had passed. He had ten minutes. She would be here in ten minutes. He walked to the car, and while George placed the cans back into the trunk, he neatly wiped the prints from the steering wheel.

"Anything else?"

"Yeah, George. Let's not leave anything undone. We'll go check the house one more time."

Proctor picked up the old man's shotgun from off the porch, pulled the hammer back and followed George into the house.

Convict?

No. This man is a patient in a mental hospital. Held prisoner by a tortured mind. Psychiatric drugs and other treatments help some of the mentally ill, but for many forms of mental illness no effective treatment has yet been found. The answer is research. Your financial help is needed.

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ALACRAN

BY JACK KELSEY

"Alacran" is the Mexican word for scorpion. Though not normally deadly, the scorpion's sting is potent enough to kill a man . . . if the man is frightened enough.

HANK MOFFAT stood at his bedroom window and stared angrily at the swirl of color on the plaza across the way. Although he'd lived in Mexico a year he knew nothing of fiestas, except there were too many of them. As usual the girls circled in one direction, the boys in the other, laughing, swapping flowers, flirting. The village band in the weatherbeaten cupola had passed the *tequila* bottle and had started mismatching oompas with tootles again. At midnight there'd be fireworks and rockets and probably church bells. Sleep would be impossible.

A figure detached itself from the movement and color and light on the plaza and walked into the shadows of the cobblestone street in front of his house. It was a young man in faded, over-washed jeans and a white shirt. Hank couldn't

see his face through the screen. A match flared and before the boy lit his cigarette their eyes met briefly. It was the *mozo* he'd fired for stealing that afternoon. But they both knew it went a lot deeper than that. Especially when Pancho had threatened to kill him.

The lines on either side of Hank's mouth fed deeper into his squared chin. He did not like the lighted room behind him, but he doubted that Pancho owned a pistol or had money enough to buy one in the city. He walked to the bureau, got out his old .45, then casually crossed the room and transferred it to the drawer in his bed stand. When he closed the heavy inside shutters Pancho was still there, but he'd got the message. Hank had faced down a lot of punks in his time and he wasn't about to let some young monkey bluff him now.

He took the *serape* from his bed and folded it over a chair. He'd bought it right off the back of an old guy one chilly night to prove these people would do anything for money. But tonight it was hot, especially with the shutters closed, so he pulled down the top sheet and went into the sala to mix another rum and soda. He returned with the paperback western he was reading, shrugged off his robe; kicked off his slippers and sprawled out on the bed wearing only his pajama bottoms.

Hank was a big muscular man with milk-white skin broken by two ugly scars on his chest which he wore like medals. One was from a sniper's bullet in Korea, the other from a cutting fray he'd broken up as Sheriff back home. He'd gotten his man in both cases. His heart had forced his retirement while still young enough to enjoy life, and a small paunch proved he was doing it in his own way.

In fact, as he often told himself, he'd never had it so good. No wife or kids. No responsibilities. His monthly checks paid for a comfortable house, two part-time servants, all he could eat and drink. The only thing that bugged him was the people, but then, he'd always been a loner. Anybody who wanted trouble, Pancho or anybody else, would find they'd picked the wrong man.

Hank put his drink on the bed stand and pulled up the sheet. He stretched his full length with a long contented sigh that was choked off as he felt a sharp sting on his left ankle. His leg jerked in a kicking movement and he felt the sharp pricking sensation again. He threw back the sheet and rolled out of the low bed in a panic. Instinctively he knew what had happened. His heart was pounding and there was the familiar tension in his chest as he got to his knees and then to his feet.

There it was. A scorpion. Like a miniature lobster less than two inches long. Doubly repulsive because it seemed to have no head

between its tiny pincer-like claws. Its long barbed tail curved over its back in striking position. As he watched in horror it crawled under the folds of the sheet at the foot of the bed.

Hank grabbed up his robe and threw open the shutters. He was too frightened to attach any significance to the fact that Pancho was still there. "Get Lupe!" he yelled. "She's somewhere on the plaza! Get her!" The figure in the shadows didn't move but the cigarette tip glowed brightly. What was the matter with the fool; he understood English!

"Why?" asked Pancho calmly.

"I've been stung by a scorpion! Go get Lupe or I'll. . . ." Suddenly he realized this was no time for threats. It didn't come easy but he managed to say "Please." Pancho flipped his cigarette away and walked back toward the plaza.

Hank got into his slippers and hobbled into the living room to turn on a lamp. He pulled his robe about him and drew a deep breath. I mustn't panic, he thought, I mustn't let my imagination take over. Here I'm limping and there's nothing wrong with my leg yet except it's beginning to feel sore. He sat down in a pigskin chair by the fireplace and rubbed his ankle. People didn't necessarily die from a scorpion sting—or did they? He wished he could recall some story he must have heard in the village, but the truth of the matter was that he didn't speak Spanish nor take any interest in the life about him.

How long would it take Pancho to find help?

He reached for a cigarette in the box on the leather table, but stopped with his hand outstretched. Why had Pancho stayed on outside the house after the shutters were closed? What had he been waiting for outside the window? Had the crazy kid been in the bedroom after their fight in the patio that afternoon? Remembering the boy's face Hank was suddenly sure the scorpion had been no accident. And there would be no help. For the first time in many years Hank felt very alone and frightened.

And so his vast relief was mixed with surprise when he heard a key turn in the lock. Only Lupe, his part-time maid, had the privilege of entering his house at will. She would know what to do. The woman who came into the lamplight was small and slender and straight. Her pleasant Indian face was dark and expressionless, neither young nor old, and although Hank guessed her to be in her middle thirties, Lupe neither knew her own age nor seemed concerned about it. She wore her *reboso* draped gracefully about her shoulders, her black hair falling in two braids down her back.

She looked at Hank with grave luminous eyes. "Alacran?" she asked.

He pointed to his ankle and then to the bedroom. She crossed the

room with the easy dignity a model might have envied. He followed her to the door and indicated the bed. She quickly tore the top sheet off revealing the hideous little creature near the foot. With one end of the sheet she flicked it to the tiled floor and stepped on it with cool efficiency. Hank shuddered in spite of himself.

Lupe crouched to examine the dead scorpion and Hank noticed that one of the straps on her cheap plastic sandals was broken. When she straightened up the expression in her clear obsidian eyes had changed. She spoke to him in her soft rapid Spanish and Hank felt the old flare of annoyance: why couldn't these people get it through their heads that he didn't understand their gibberish!

A voice spoke from the living room. "She says you will be dead before the night is over."

Hank whirled to see Pancho standing inside the door with an amused smirk on his handsome face.

"You're a liar!" he shouted.

Lupe came out of the bedroom, brushing past him and shaking her finger at Pancho as she spoke. The smile faded from his face.

"All right," he said sullenly in English. "She says you are in no danger. You will have some pain but you will be all right. Your alacran might kill a small child but not a grown man." Hank limped to the sofa and sat down abruptly. Pancho added, "So try to act like one, Senor."

"Get out," Hank said hoarsely. "Get out and stay out, like I told you."

Pancho didn't move. A tall boy in his late teens, he towered over Lupe, his golden skin a contrast to her dark brown, his face as open to his emotions as hers was closed. Right now his perfect white teeth gleamed in a smile that somehow expressed contempt.

"You do not want me to go for the nurse?" he asked.

"The nurse?"

"She is on the plaza. She has a serum against scorpion bites." Pancho's smile vanished. "As you say so often, Lupe is only a stupid Indian. She cannot read or write. Why take her word about these things? At the school in the city they teach us that an injection is the way to be sure."

Hank cursed to himself. Now he was right back where he started. His ankle was beginning to throb. If he had a car he'd make the drive into the city where there were doctors. The disadvantages of being the only American in a Mexican village were outweighing the advantages tonight. Time could be the important factor. He racked his brain for the Spanish word. She might be stupid but he trusted Lupe.

"Nurse?" he asked, looking at her.

"Enfermera," said Pancho.

Lupe gave a small shrug which said "Why not?" as clearly as her *"Como no?"*

"Okay. Get the nurse. And hurry it up." Hank didn't look at Pancho as the boy went out leaving the door ajar. The cheerful sounds of the fiesta drifted in. Lupe crouched down and touched his ankle gently. It wasn't swollen but the area felt hard under her fingers. Hard and cold and numb. Only his pride had kept him from asking Pancho what to expect. Would the poison spread up his leg? Into his system? To his heart?

As if reading his mind Lupe said, *"Calmese,* Senor," and went to the patio door. She put on the outside light, closed the screen quietly behind her and went along the covered corridor which led to the kitchen and bathroom. The patch of grass, so carefully weeded by Pancho, gleamed darkly between the high walls splashed with the red and purple of the bougainvillea.

Lupe returned at once with a cup and a piece of cotton. She went to the liquor cabinet which Hank kept locked during the day and took out a bottle of *tequila.* He caught her eye as she poured a shot into the cup. His puzzlement was rewarded with the trace of a smile. She brought the cup and showed him the dissolving crystals which she stirred with her finger. He could smell the odor of camphor through the *tequila* as she motioned for him to lie back on the sofa and put his foot up.

Hank felt a rare wave of gratitude as she knelt and bathed his ankle gently. For eight dollars a week Lupe did the buying and cooking, the washing and ironing, kept the house spotless. Unlike Pancho she knew her place; women her age had been brought up in the shadow of their men. All he really knew about her was that she had three children and no husband. With him she was neither friendly nor unfriendly; she was . . . well, correct. But time would take care of that. He reached out and caressed her shoulder as Pancho opened the door and came in.

For a second the two men looked at each other levelly. Then Pancho said, "There is no serum. The nurse is what you call fresh out."

For the second time that day Hank felt murder in his heart. The boy had a talent for keeping him off balance, leaving him unsure of himself. But this was playing with life and death. He'd bet his last cent that Pancho was lying—and yet he'd railed a hundred times against the village for always being "fresh out" of things he wanted.

The first rocket went off thunderously in the plaza before Hank could speak. And as the church bells set up their clanging the door was pushed open and an enormous fat man came in. He had a shock of white hair and a jolly red face, as though Santa Claus had shaved

off his beard and changed his costume for a sport shirt.

"Just in time," he said, slamming the door. "Love those fireworks, hate those blockbusters. That's better. Our good San Antonio may like the racket, but I could have a mess of burned fingers to treat before the night's over."

"Dr. Ferguson!" Hank managed to croak.

"Hiya, Hank. Hear you took a scorpion to bed. Can't say much for your taste. *Como esta,* Lupe?"

"What are you doing here!"

"Never miss a fiesta. Drove out from the city." Dr. Ferguson was a member of the American colony, mostly retired folks. Hank had lived among them for a few months before he tired of their reminiscences and gregariousness. "How come you missed the show, Hank? You're the only gringo in town. Thank goodness that racket only lasts a few minutes. How can you live so close to the plaza! Low rent I suppose. How's the leg?"

"It aches."

"Let's take a look at it." He handed a package to Lupe and they exchanged a few words in Spanish before the maid went out into the patio. "Camphor and *tequila,* eh," he said sniffing. "Well, *tequila*'s always good for what ails you and camphor's an anti-spasmodic."

"A what?" said Hank.

"Never mind. Trouble breathing or speaking?" Hank shook his head. "Mouth dry?"

"Yes."

The doctor grinned. "That's fear. Copious saliva's a bad symptom. You'd be drooling if you were in any trouble. You're all right, Hank."

"You're sure?"

"You don't have to take my word. You can take Lupe's."

"How would she know?"

"Experience," the doctor said dryly. "Her folks have lived here a lot longer than we have. Besides, she's a *curandera,* a healer. But we're going to give you a shot to make doubly sure. Lupe's boiling the needle right now."

"Where'd you get the serum?"

"The nurse. You don't think I carry the stuff around with me, do you? I borrowed the syringe. . . ." He broke off at the sight of Frank's face. He was looking at Pancho with hate in his eyes. The boy hadn't moved since the doctor came in.

"You'll pay for that, wise guy," Hank grated.

"I told you the truth," Pancho said calmly. "The nurse had no serum. She gave the last of it to the doctor."

"And you knew it!"

"It doesn't matter," the doctor said quickly. "I'll drive out with some more tomorrow morning. Give you a second shot."

Hank held up his hand. "Sit down, buster," he said to Pancho. "I want to ask you some questions. In front of a witness."

"Now take it easy," the doctor warned. "Don't make like an ex-Sheriff, Hank."

"Shut up, Doc. This was no accident. I want to know how that scorpion got in my bed!"

"Good Lord, man, there could be a dozen explanations," the doctor began, but at that moment the screen door slammed and Lupe came in with a loaded tray. The doctor took the basin of hot water and began to wash his hands. "Won't help to get excited, Hank, not with that ticker of yours. Questions later. Major operation coming up. *Algodon y alcohol,* Lupe? Oh yes. You know it wasn't till I retired that I discovered an old sardine can is just the right shape for a sterilizer." He continued his preparations, chatting like a cheerful magpie. "Roll up your sleeve, Hank; company present," he concluded, holding up the syringe and squinting at it.

A moment later, as Hank rolled down his sleeve, the doctor dropped his bantering tone and said, "Let me tell you about your little friend with the stinger in his tail, Hank. First, this village is fairly free of 'em since it was sprayed for malaria."

"We still have them in my house," Pancho interrupted. "Of course it is a shack with a dirt floor, not elegant like this—"

"Second," the doctor said quickly. "A good many of them are dangerous only to children—"

"Oh no," said Pancho. "The *alacran amarillo*—the little yellow scorpion is deadly. He kills adults too. I saw one yesterday—"

"That's enough, Pancho," the doctor said sharply. "Now let me show you something. Come into the bedroom." Hank limped after him, his mouth set and his eyes hard. He said nothing when Lupe and Pancho followed as far as the door. His turn would come later, when this fat, do-gooding fool had had his say.

"Now just look at your ceiling," Dr. Ferguson was saying. Five rough beams held it up. Across the beams at irregular intervals lay strips of what looked like bamboo, supporting a layer of *petates* or woven mats. "The tiles on your roof are old and loose, Hank," the doctor continued. "A ceiling like that is a well known nesting place for scorpions."

"You mean there may be a whole family up there?" Pancho inquired innocently from the doorway.

"I mean it's possible for one to fall into a bed," the doctor replied, looking at the boy with a puzzled frown.

"Quite a coincidence, Doc." Hank spoke for the first time.

"It's happened before."

"When Lupe made up the bed this morning? When it was covered all day with a *serape?* You mean the thing fought its way under the covers?" Hank's voice rose gradually to anger.

"When did you turn the sheet down?"

"Just before I got into bed! That's the point! I wasn't out of the room more than a few seconds!"

"How's that?"

"I went into the living room to make a drink. But . . . well, it couldn't have taken more 'n a minute!"

"That's probably your answer."

"Nuts! Next you'll be telling me it was there all day!"

The doctor sighed. "You'll have to ask the *alacran*. It could have happened either way." He walked past Lupe and Pancho into the living room saying, "Mind if I have a shot of Lupe's antiseptic?"

"Help yourself." Hank followed him, limping up and down the room. "There's more to this than meets the eye, Doc." he said harshly. "Pancho stole a *mono* today. It was old and worth plenty. You know the one, a clay figure of some ancient broad. You yourself told me it was pre-Columbian when you came out for my check-up. Naturally I fired him!"

"So I heard on the plaza," the doctor said, *tequila* bottle in hand. "Word gets around fast. *Un vaso,* Lupe?"

As Lupe got a shot glass from the cabinet Hank went on. "Naturally he denied it and when he called me a liar I lost my temper and let him have it. Did you happen to hear he threatened to kill me?"

"No," said the doctor, pouring his glass to the brim. "No, I didn't. Sit down and keep off your leg for a while. Have a drink. Won't do you any harm."

"I've got one in the...." Hank broke off looking at the bedroom door. "Pancho!" he shouted. "What do you think you're doing in there!"

"Getting your drink," said Pancho, coming in with the glass. "I forgot I did not work here until I heard you calling me a thief. Also I look for more scorpions. There are some in the kitchen. Ask Lupe. She found one today. A little yellow one—"

"Now, now!" the doctor said. "Don't let him bug you, Hank! Why does the Senor suspect you of putting the scorpion in his bed, Panchito?"

"It is his habit to accuse me first and ask questions afterward."

"I'll ask a couple of questions all right!" Hank broke in before Dr. Ferguson could speak. "What were you doing in my bedroom this afternoon after I told you to get the hell out of my house?"

"I had been nailing down the screen where the *ninos* tore it. I went back to get my tools."

"I didn't expect you to admit you planted a scorpion in my bed. Okay. So tell me why you were hanging around outside my window when I went to bed?"

Pancho appeared to look thoughtful. "I will tell you the truth, Senor. I was thinking of ways to kill you."

"Now what do you think, Doc!"

"As a matter of fact I was wondering how much of this Lupe understands," the doctor said, holding up his empty glass. Lupe quickly brought the tequila bottle.

"She doesn't think anything, one way or the other," Hank said. "Why should she?"

"Good Lord, man, don't you know what you've done!" The doctor regarded his *tequila* with active dislike before slugging it down. For the first time he seemed upset. "You don't throw accusations around without proof here. Pancho considers himself a human being too. He's young, ambitious, smart. Learned English as a *bracero,* sent his money home to his mother. He's got what passes for a scholarship at the Institute. Now you brand him a thief in his own village and maybe lose him his chance for an education!"

"Gracias, Senor," Pancho said quietly.

"Don't thank me," the doctor said before Hank could speak. "You're a fool to make threats! The day when you could kill a man and ride off into the hills till it blew over are gone. If anything happens to the Senor I'll report you myself. There'll be questions, an autopsy, the works."

"Gracias, Senor," Hank said sarcastically. "But I can take care of myself. I've got a gun and this kid knows I'll use it if he gives me an excuse."

The doctor threw up his hands. "What's behind all this! *Que paso aqui,* Lupe? *Digame!*"

Lupe spoke softly, without a trace of expression, but she looked directly at Pancho. The doctor smiled. "Good idea. For your benefit, Hank, she says Pancho is a good boy, an honest boy. And why don't we ask him the sixty-four *peso* question."

"Such as?"

"Such as did he steal the *mono.* Did you, son?"

"No, Senor Doctor."

"Did you put the scorpion in the Senor's bed?"

"Of course not," Pancho said simply.

"Prove it!" Hank's sneer was almost a snarl.

"When I put an alacran in your bed, Senor, it will be a small yellow one."

Hank came off the couch like a spring uncoiled. One hand grabbed the front of Pancho's shirt and he pushed the boy against the wall, his other hand folding into a hard tight fist. But Lupe moved almost as fast and was holding his arm before the doctor got out of his chair.

"Cut it out, Hank!" Dr. Ferguson's voice held an authority quite out of keeping with his jovial appearance. "You're a little too partial to violence yourself. And keep your hand out of your pocket, Pancho," he said as Hank released the boy and limped back to the couch.

"I do not carry a knife, *amigo,*"

said Pancho grimly. "There are other ways. . . ."

"Try one and you'll rot in prison, son. I mean it. Last warning. Now go on home. And tomorrow I'll want your mother's word that you stayed there."

The boy seemed to force the words out, as though there was something shameful about them. "And will you give me *your* word that this pig keeps his hands off my mother?" He went out closing the door with a deliberation more dramatic than had he slammed it.

"Well, well, well," said the doctor, looking at his patient. Hank's fury had drained into a kind of open-mouthed incredulity. He avoided Dr. Ferguson's eye. "I had a hunch there was more to this. You honestly didn't know that Lupe is Pancho's mother?"

"Never occurred to me. Why should it?"

"It's what got you into trouble. You understand all this?" he asked Lupe.

The maid looked at him blankly. The doctor switched to Spanish. "*Es malo,* Lupe. I did not understand before. It is possible your son will try to kill the *patron.*" Lupe shook her head. "No? Well, you know him better than I do. May I have another *tequila?*"

As Lupe went for the bottle Dr. Ferguson switched back to English. "I'll pour it myself, but I'd like some salt and a slice of lemon."

Lupe turned automatically to the patio door, but stopped as she opened it and looked over her shoulder, "Ai Senor!" she said reprovingly.

The doctor grinned as she continued to the kitchen. "She understands enough English to know an excuse when she hears one. So you been making passes at your maid, Hank."

"Doesn't everyone?"

"No. And certainly not in front of the maid's son who's as big a xenophobe as you!"

"What?"

"Look it up." He poured a shot of *tequila* and sat down. "So now you know why I wondered what Lupe thought of all this."

"I don't care what she thinks!"

"You'd better. She's the only thing you got working for you."

"You mean. . . ." Hank's eyes wandered toward the kitchen.

"No," said the doctor, hiding his disgust. "Lupe's a respectable woman and deeply religious. But she probably doesn't give a hang whether you're alive or dead. She's used to a high mortality rate. However, murder is something else! To you it's against the law, especially in your own case. To Lupe it's a deadly sin. And . . . it's her own son who's in danger of committing it!"

"I get the picture."

"Well, I don't! Lupe ought to be a heck of a lot more concerned about Pancho's immortal soul!"

"She's never 'concerned' about anything, Doc."

"Don't let that mask fool you, Hank. Now that I've got the picture there's still something wrong with it."

Lupe came in and offered Dr. Ferguson a plate with slices of lemon arranged around the salt. "Good Lord, she took the time to make a fruit salad, and I don't know which comes first, the lemon or the salt." As Lupe went into the bedroom he gulped his *tequila* straight.

There was a rumble of thunder in the distance. "Shower coming up. End of fiesta," said the doctor. "I'd better run before the storm knocks your lights out. How's your ankle now?"

"Feels like I'd sprained it. But it's better."

"You're okay. Except. . . ." The doctor paused. "Well, why don't you move back to the city?"

"I like it here."

"You like living twice as well on half as much, as they say. But even a loner like you can't take it with him, Hank. I've got a feeling you've created a situation you can't escape, among people you don't understand." He heaved himself out of the chair and called, *"Vamanos,* Lupe."

The maid came in and said something to the doctor as she took her *reboso* from a chair and gracefully covered her head and shoulders.

"She says she's pulled your bed together, Hank, and . . ."

"Tell her I'll pull it apart before I get into it this time!"

Lupe took a key from her apron pocket and offered it to Hank.

"Aw, wait a minute, Lupe!" he said. "Tell her I don't want her to quit, Doc. I was only kidding. I trust her."

"That's not the point," the doctor said dryly. "She's thinking of Pancho. She said it's better your key is not in her house tonight."

"She's got a point at that. Gracias, Lupe." He took the key and limped to the door after them. "You'll give me another shot tomorrow morning, Doc?"

"First thing. Not that you need it, but I want to bring a supply of serum for the nurse. I'd hate to think *you* got the last shot when some kid might need it. Night, Hank."

"See you tomorrow. You too, Lupe." He noticed the plaza was almost deserted now as he closed the door and shot the bolt. He could hear their voices clearly outside, but he couldn't understand the words.

"What really happened to the *mono*, Lupe?" Dr. Ferguson was saying in Spanish.

"I think the Senor broke it himself. I found a small piece of it when I swept the *sala* this morning."

"And you said nothing?"

"My word against his? An Americano who spends much money here?"

"And that's why you continue to work for him?"

"Pancho will need clothes for school next month."

"And old Hank needed an excuse to get you alone. So he fired Pancho." Lupe shrugged. "I do not have much respect for this man, Lupe, but I have respect for law and order. If anything should happen to your *patron*, it will go hard with your son. For his own sake will you warn him?"

"Pancho will bring no harm to this man. I promise you."

"Thank you, Senora. *Buenas noches.*"

"Good night, Senor Doctor," Lupe said in English. And Hank, with his ear to the door, smiled at the words. Lupe wasn't so dumb after all.

He took his empty glass and poured himself a stiff drink of rum, adding a little soda. Ordinarily he'd have gone to the kitchen for ice, but the idea of wandering outside in his slippers made his skin crawl. He looked at the high walls on either side of the patio. A young fellow could conceivably climb over them from the neighbor's yard, but Pancho wouldn't try that as long as he had his .45.

He turned out the patio light and fastened the screen door securely. Taking his glass he went into the bedroom and opened the shutters a crack. The plaza, still lighted, was deserted now except for a drunk sleeping on a bench and two men staggering off, their *sombreros* tipped low and their *serapes* held high against the night air. The sky split open with a flash of lightning and was answered by distant thunder. The storm would be upon them soon. The silence he'd craved earlier now made him feel edgy. He went to the bed stand and pulled open the drawer.

The gun was gone.

Hank took a deep breath and listened to the irregular pounding of his heart. Pancho had seen him put the gun there! How long had Pancho been in the bedroom after they'd inspected the ceiling? And what a fool he'd been to let the crazy kid back into the house at all! He took a great gulp of his drink and limped into the living room to turn the lamp off. In the darkness he closed and bolted the inside door to the patio, no longer trusting the screen. He thought of going for help, but if Pancho should be outside waiting for him. . . . No, he was safer locked inside the house.

In the bedroom he got a handkerchief from the bureau and mopped his face. His hand was trembling. Use your head, he told himself; it's tomorrow you have to worry about. Lupe would see to it that Pancho didn't leave home tonight. What was it Doc had said? Lupe wouldn't let her son commit a mortal sin! Yeah. That was it. Good old Lupe.

Still—there wouldn't be any sleep for him tonight. He wouldn't even turn the light off. As he turned down the sheet another thought struck him like a clap of thunder. He pulled the sheet off and shook it violently. He examined the

whiteness of the under sheet with distaste, then the floor.

What did you expect, he thought as he tucked the top sheet in again. To himself he was now willing to admit that the scorpion in his bed had probably fallen from the ceiling. He kicked off his slippers and tossed his robe on a chair. Then he stretched out on the bed and stared at the ceiling, waiting for his heart to quiet down.

After a long while he sighed and turned on his side, sliding his hand under the pillow for comfort. His hand touched something hard and brittle, something that moved. His whole body tightened in a muscular spasm of fear as his arm came up, throwing the pillow across the room. The bed lamp revealed the tiny lobster-like creature, not more than an inch long, an almost transparent yellow in color. For an eternal second Hank couldn't move. It was the scorpion who broke the spell, its miniature pincer-like claws moving blindly and its tail curling angrily over its back.

Hank struggled up, looking at his hand in horror, knocking the glass from his bed stand. The tension in his chest began to turn to a grinding pain which spread down his left arm. When everything went black before his eyes, his mind was no longer functioning and the broken glass under his feet seemed crawling things. He staggered to the bedroom door and into the living room . . . before he fell.

The sky was a clear blue and the cobblestones washed clean by the night's shower when Dr. Ferguson drove up in front of Hank Moffat's house next morning. Lupe was sitting on the curb, her *reboso* wrapped about her head and shoulders; from her expression, neither troubled nor impatient, she might have been waiting minutes or centuries.

"What's the matter!" the doctor called in Spanish as he struggled out of the car.

"Nothing," said Lupe, getting to her feet. "The Senor is not up. He does not answer his door."

"Did you knock?"

"A little. But the Senor is very particular—"

The doctor interrupted by pounding on the door and shouting, "Hank! Hey, Hank!"

"The Senor is very angry when you wake him before he is ready," Lupe said reprovingly. She took a Colt .45 from under her *reboso* and offered it to the doctor.

"Good Lord! Where'd you get that!"

"I took the Senor's *pistola* last night. It seemed better that it should be in my keeping."

"I guess you're right." The doctor put it gingerly in his pocket, his mind elsewhere. He put his massive weight against the door and pushed. Then he called to a villager who had stopped to watch them. "There's something wrong here, *hombre*! Give me a hand."

Together they splintered the door at the lock and pushed it open. Hank lay where he had fallen. The doctor knelt at his side and felt for his heart and pulse. Then he said grimly, "Go for the police, *amigo*. The *federales* I mean. We're going to do this right. Lupe, you stay here."

"He is dead?" Lupe asked quietly as the man went out.

"Been dead for hours," the doctor answered. As he began to examine Hank's naked torso Lupe went into the bedroom.

"The light—the lamp—is on," she said.

"Then he was still up," the doctor called. "It must have happened soon after we left. The storm knocked the lights off before I got home."

Lupe pulled the top sheet off the bed. She lifted the one pillow still in place.

"What are you doing in there?" Dr. Ferguson called.

"Looking for an *alacran*," Lupe answered.

"You're wasting your time. There's absolutely no sign he tangled with a scorpion; no symptoms whatsoever. So far it looks like plain old fashioned heart attack."

But Lupe had turned back a loose corner of the under sheet and was examining something on the mattress. When it moved she deftly picked the scorpion up and, cupping it gently in her hand, went into the living room.

"It was his heart?" she asked.

"I'd swear to it," the doctor said. "But under the circumstances. . . ." He hesitated. "Pancho?"

"Did not leave the house all night, Senor Doctor."

"Still—I'm going to ask for an autopsy. You understand?"

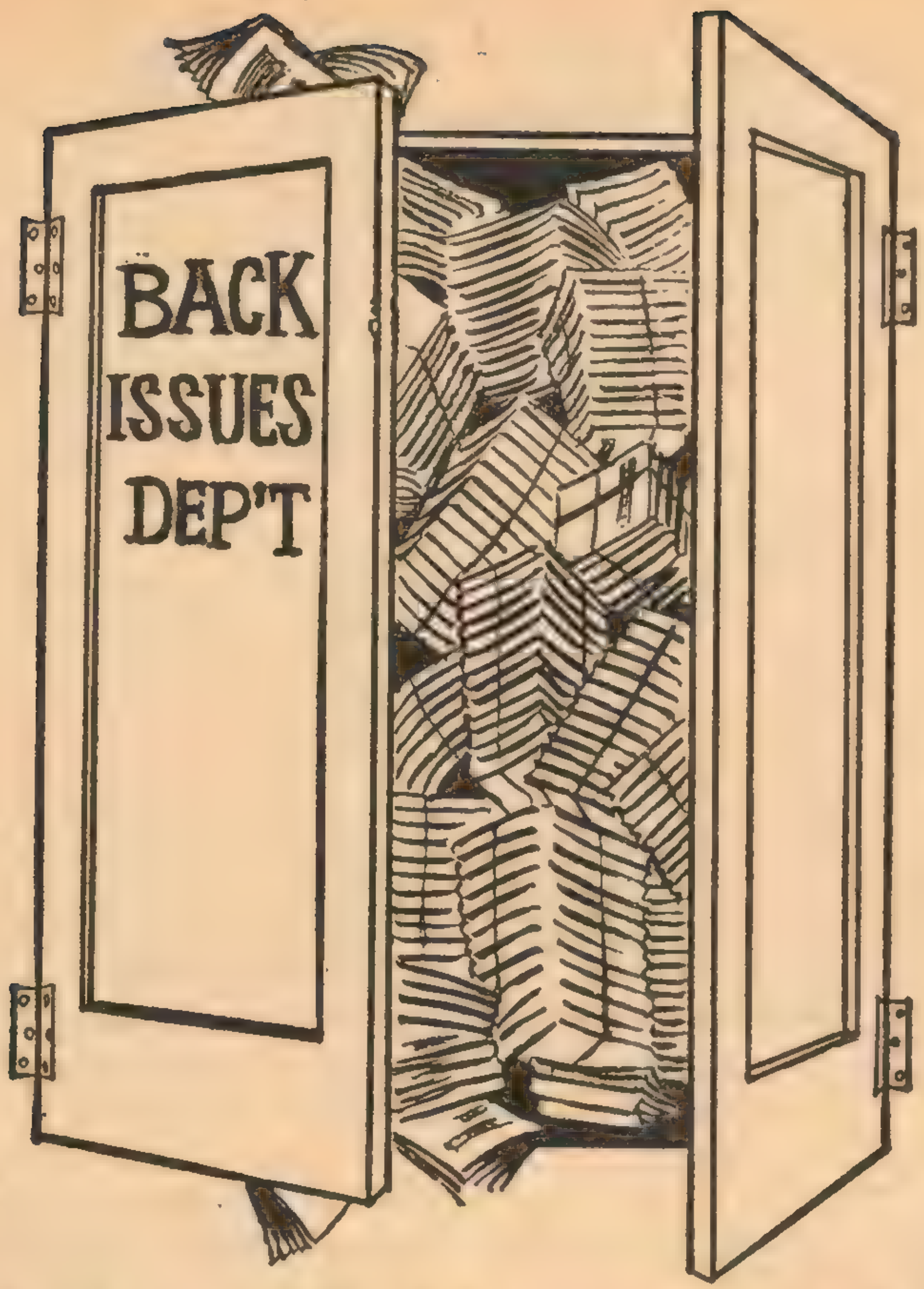
"But of course. I will make you some coffee."

"I could use some. Thanks, Lupe."

He continued his examination as Lupe awkwardly unlocked the patio door with one hand and crossed to the kitchen. Once inside she opened the other hand and let the tiny yellow scorpion scuttle down her fingers onto a shelf.

"Go back to your family, little one," she said sadly. "You will find it hard enough to keep alive without your stinger. It may have been a sin to clip off the tip of your evil tail . . . but it seemed to me the lesser of two evils."

She put the water on to boil and carefully reached up for the coffee tin on the shelf.



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I've always figured that I'm a pretty shrewd operator when it comes to hiring help for my business, but I have to admit that Ernie Parret fooled me, and it's my own damned fault. . . . If I'd been thinking a little clearer at the time, I'd have noticed that his smile was too easy, his laugh a little too tight, and the glint of his eye reflected more greed than mirth. But I'd been taken in. He had a studied nonchalance and an earnest way about him that had taken me completely off guard. He was also one beauty of a salesman. He sold himself to me and I hired him.

Don't misunderstand me; he did a tremendous job. He was twenty-six at the time and a bachelor, five years older than my daughter, Cathy, who was still in college. I put him in our north-western division, which had been one of our slowest territories, and in three months we knew there was a man on the job. Orders were coming in so fast that I actually had to shake up production to keep up with them. By the end of the first year, Ernie's territory had changed from a complete dog to our best market and it showed no sign of letting up.

ricochet

BY W. SHERWOOD HARTMAN

True, he was a well-made young man . . . bright and handsome. But only a young girl's loving father would notice the greedy cynicism in her young man's smile.

Things like this, a business man can't ignore.

Then Ed Stacey, my vice-president in charge of sales was killed in an accident and I moved Ernie into his slot. I knew there would be some grumbling behind my back from the older men, but I didn't much care. Ernie had only been with the company for two years, but he had developed into our top man and they all knew it. He had earned the job, and that was the way it would be.

The first feeling I had that something was wrong about Ernie came after Cathy graduated from college . . . I'd been both father and mother to her since she was four years old. Her mother had been a wonderful wife to me and, after she had died, I could never bring myself to remarry. Maybe it would have been better if I had, but it seemed as though something would have been lost. So, I concentrated on my business and on raising Cathy. She had been an endless source of pleasure to me as a child and now she had grown into a beautiful woman. . . . Just being the two of us, we were much closer than the average father and daughter, and there's never been a father more proud of his child.

She went to work in the advertising department after college. That's when she met Ernie, and that's when I began to worry. . . . Actually, the very things that had made him so valuable to my company were the things that irritated me the most about him. . . . His damnedably dark good looks, his easy smile, and the way he would look into your eyes as much as to say, I'll do your bidding, my lord, and I'll do it graciously, but never forget, *I am the master!*" . . . He reminded me of a tiger in a circus ring that would jump through the hoop at the trainer's command, then sit on a stool silently smiling, secure in the knowledge that, regardless of the chair, whip, or gun, one swift leap and a quick sweep of his paw could disembowel his puny overseer. . . . When Ernie was near Cathy, I could sense the feline detachment about him, and I could also sense that she was completely fascinated by him. I knew what was going to eventually happen, but I was powerless to do anything about it. . . . How can you communicate with your only daughter, regardless of how close you are, when your feelings don't even sound logical after you've put them on paper and read them back to yourself?

It went pretty close to the way I figured it would. Ernie took Cathy to lunch nearly every day and was a regular fixture at the Sunday afternoon swimming parties by the pool at our place. Then, with winter, there were the skiing weekends and I found myself seeing less and less of Cathy. I tired to tell myself that it was just a passing thing, but I knew better. Cathy was all I had left and I didn't want her to make a mistake. The things I sensed about Ernie kept sneaking out of my subconscious, but I kept tucking them back, trying to keep my nose out of something that I had no right to meddle into . . , Cathy was a grown woman. I had to realize that fact sooner or later. She had the right to make her own decisions.

It was nearly a year after they had met that they walked into my living room an announced that they had been married that afternoon. Cathy

was so radiantly happy that I couldn't spoil it for her. My tears of angry frustration passed under the guise of parental happiness as I embraced her. Ernie's smile reminded me of a smug ferret that had just cleaned out a chicken coop. I can never remember hating a man the way I hated him at that moment.

They left on a four week honeymoon and I was so irritable at the plant for the next few days that I decided to take a vacation before I disrupted the entire organization with my foul humor. . . . The company plane flew me out to the hunting and fishing lodge we maintain in Wisconsin for my pleasure and for entertaining sports minded customers. There's a fine trout stream there, leading into the lake, and 178 acres of excellent pheasant shooting. The cabin is always well stocked, completely isolated, and there's no phone to disrupt the solitude. I dismissed the pilot and told him to pick me up in two weeks.

The fishing was good the next day, and I didn't think of Cathy and Ernie too much. But the following day turned cold and a damp mist seeped through my bones as I fished. . . . The trout wouldn't rise to anything. I gave up in chilled disgust and went back to the cabin. Shaking with cold, I set a fire in the stone fireplace and put water on the stove to heat. By the time it came to a boil, the fireplace had come alive and was filling the room with a pleasant hickory warmth. I mixed a rum toddy and stood with my back to the fire, feeling the dampness of my clothes turn to soothing steam against my shoulders. I sipped the toddy, letting the pungent aroma sift into my nostrils. . . . Then I felt the agonizing and familiar lance of pain spear through my chest . . . I've gone through it many times before, but there is always the panic, the fear that maybe this time you can't get to the pill quick enough. Your guts suck up inside you and there's nothing left but a vacuum. It never seems like there will be enough time, but I made it again . . . I got the pill under my tongue and slumped into my chair and waited for the agony to subside.

It didn't take long . . . My breathing came easier and I found myself relaxing with the warmth of the fire toasting my shins. Then I felt myself dozing and everything was suddenly clear. I had become disembodied and was watching something in slow motion. . . . I could see Ernie . . . I could see his motives . . . It was all there, pictured in technicolor on a screen as wide as the sky! . . . Ernie had taken the primrose path to success! He had talent, ambition, drive; everything that a man needs to succeed. Now he had added the one indisputable factor that made failure impossible. He had married the boss's daughter . . . The only thing left between Ernie and the top of the heap was me.

I don't know how long I slept in the chair, but when I awoke the fire had burned to a bed of glowing orange embers. I put a fresh log in place and mixed another rum toddy. Then the thought came to me again . . . The only thing left between Ernie and the top was *me!* . . . I didn't like the feeling, because the only thing that had been between Ernie and Ed Stacey's job had been Ed! It had never crossed my mind before, but now I started to wonder.

Ed Stacey had lived up on the hill in the Pinecrest section of town. He had the habit of always backing into his driveway so that he could pull out without backing into the traffic. About three blocks down the hill from his place, the road dead ends and makes a hard right turn. On the morning that he was killed, his car didn't make that turn. He got part way around, then skidded and rolled over the guard rails and dropped sixty feet onto the railroad tracks below. They examined what was left of his station wagon after it was over and found that the brake fluid had leaked out during the night. There was still a big puddle of it on his driveway, but it was on the opposite side of where the car had been parked, so Ed had never noticed it when he got in on the driver's side.

At the time, I'd been too shook up to suspect anything. Ed had been with me from the time I started the business, and no man could ask for a better friend. . . . He'd been godfather at Cathy's christening and, as far as I knew, he hadn't an enemy in the world, so the idea of anyone sabotaging his car had seemed ridiculous. No one had even given it any thought. It had been a sad accident and that was that.

Now, as I thought about it, it didn't seem so ridiculous . . . I watched the purple flames lick at the log in the fireplace as I set the facts in order in my mind . . . Ernie had wanted Ed's job . . . He'd never said so in that many words, but he had mentioned advancement often and his ambition was burningly evident . . . Ernie had been at the home office during the week that Ed was killed. There was the pregnant possibility that Ernie had gone up to Ed's home during the night and cut a line to let the brake fluid drain out of the station wagon. Getting rid of Ed would have been a convenient short cut in his advancement . . . He hadn't known Cathy then and had no way of knowing that he'd wind up as my son-in-law. The more I thought about it, the more it bugged me . . . If this is what had happened, if Ernie had manipulated things to get Ed killed, just to get a better job with the firm, where did I stand? What method would he use to eliminate me? What would happen to Cathy?

I tried to look at the thing from both sides . . . Supposing I was

wrong? What if Ed's car had had a mechanical difficulty that had caused it to lose the brake fluid? What if Ernie was really in love with Cathy and didn't give a damn about my money? What if the whole thing I was building up in my mind was nothing more than a figment of a doting old man's fertile imagination? I had to know, because it all boiled down to one thing . . . If Ernie was a killer, I was a fish in a barrel. I have enough trouble staying alive with this goofed up ticker of mine without worrying about somebody trying to knock me off. There had to be some way I could find out.

The idea came to me on the last day of my stay at the lodge. I had been hunting crows with no real enthusiasm and was cleaning my shotgun that evening when the plan began to develop in my mind. In fact, it was the shotgun that gave me the idea. It's an old double barreled LeFevre with a single trigger and a selector lever on the side. Wtih the selector lever in the forward position, the right barrel fires first and the left fires with the second pull of the trigger. The right barrel is choked and spreads a wide shot pattern at short range. The left is open and keeps the pattern smaller and grouped for longer shots. So if you miss the first shot at close range, you still have a good chance of a hit as the bird is going away. . . . If a bird flushes at a long range, a flick of the selector lever sets the left barrel to fire first . . . I'd hunted with the piece for years and I loved it, but it did have one drawback. The barrels had been made of spun wire Damascus steel and were too soft to take the impact of the newer high explosive shells. But the gun fitted me; I was used to it; so I still used the old fashioned black powder shells for my hunting.

I'd cleaned the gun and was polishing the silver inlays when all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place. The solution was so obvious that it stunned me for a moment . . . All I had to do was give Ernie an opportunity to kill me. It was as simple as that! If I had him figured right, I could set up a perfect situation for him to kill me and he couldn't help but fall for it . . . If I had him figured wrong, he'd never know there had been a trap set for him, and I'd be able to sleep a lot easier from there on in . . . I rubbed the engraved walnut stock of the LeFevre and gave it a final caress as I tucked it into it's case. Then I packed and was ready to leave when the plane came for me the next morning.

Cathy and Ernie came home from their honeymoon two weeks later. They bought a house near where I lived and it wasn't too long until things fell into a regular routine. They'd have me to dinner at their place every Tuesday, and they'd have dinner with me on Sunday evenings. On the surface, it seemed like a pleasant family adjustment,

but I still tested my brakes every time I got in my car and I stayed away from the windows at night. It was a nervous summer, but I had to wait until fall to put my plan to the test.

The week before pheasant season opened in Wisconsin I was having dinner with Cathy and Ernie and I popped the first wedge of my plan into the conversation.

"Ernie," I said, "How about you and me doing a little hunting together next week. . . . We've both been working pretty hard and I think a vacation would be in order for the pair of us."

He turned toward Cathy, and I'll swear he blushed, "That all depends on what the little woman says."

I felt the red creep up the back of my neck like it did every time he called my Cathy his "Little Woman," but I managed to keep the smile on my face. "She's welcome to come along," I said.

"Dad", she said, "you couldn't drag me up there. You know I don't like hunting. I'd be sitting around like a third thumb . . . I'd have a lot more fun just staying home and bragging about my husband to my old girl friends . . . Besides, I think it's about time you two got to know each other." She smiled with the little turn at the corner of her mouth that reminded me so much of her mother. "You may have worked together for over three years, but you still don't know each other very well." She stood up and kissed us both. "I think it would be a real nice thing if the two most wonderful men in my life could have a vacation together."

Ernie frowned for a moment, then I could almost hear the wheels spinning in his mind like a slot machine that was lining up for the jack-pot. The frown eased into a grin. "Okay, Mr. Haskill," he said, (Thank God he called me Mister! If he'd have called me "Dad" or "Pop", I'd have clobbered him on the spot with anything I'd have found handy) "We'll go hunting . . . I think I'll enjoy it."

We were scheduled to leave the following Monday morning, but I managed enough business excuses to make it late in the afternoon before we took off. It was nearly dusk when the plane landed on the lake and taxied up to the pier in front of the lodge. The pilot wanted to go back, but I insisted that he stay over for the night. There was no reason for him to risk his neck flying at night. Besides, if I were going to be killed in a gun cleaning accident, I at least wanted a witness.

The pilot took off the next morning with instructions to pick us up the following Sunday. Then Ernie and I went back to the lodge to get ready for the day's hunting. I slipped two high velocity shells into the chambers of the LeFevre and had Ernie lead the way as we walked along the edge of the lake. We turned left when we reached the trout stream and followed it for

several hundred yards until it turned lazy through a meadowed flat that was thick with high virgin grass. The turf was soggy underfoot and I shoved the muzzle of the LeFevre deep into the soft clay. Ernie was so intent on the hunt that he never noticed as I wiped the dense mud from the outside of the barrels.

He took the first bird to rise with a beautiful swinging shot, but he missed the second. He turned to me after the miss with a puzzled frown on his face and asked, "Why didn't you take him?"

I laughed and passed it off easy, "This is your first time hunting here. That bird will still be here on our way back. Don't worry about it."

He brought down two more birds before we reached the upper end of the meadow, then we paused at a rocky outcropping for a smoke.

I felt steel bands tighten around my chest, but it wasn't my heart this time. It was the tension that had built up as we had hunted across the meadow. This was the spot where I was going to give Ernie the chance to kill me I was going to know now. There'd be no second guessing after this!

I knew damned well that if he was going to kill me he wouldn't use his own gun. If it was to look like an accident, it would have to be with my gun.

He sat down on a tilted stump and propped his Remington pump action beside him . . . I handed him the old LeFevre and asked, "Have you ever seen silver inlay like this on a modern gun?"

I backed away then and found a seat on a flat rock about three paces away. Ernie studied the inlay for a few moments, then he looked up and with a crazy gleam in his eyes, he slowly brought the gun to his shoulder and swung it toward me . . . He pressed the trigger and his face disappeared as both barrels of the LeFevre exploded and blew the breech block back through his head.

The roar of the explosion was still echoing in my ears and I had a brief instant to savor Ed's vengeance. Then I heard an insane buzzing and felt a slashing pain tug at my right hand. I jerked away, but the rattler struck again, hitting me in the thigh before I could move. I scrambled away and got to Ernie's Remington. I lined up on the snake, then I couldn't pull the trigger. I let the gun sag as I remembered that Ernie hadn't brought the LeFevre completely in line with me when he had pulled the trigger. . . . He hadn't been aiming at me, he'd been aiming at the snake!

I watched as the snake eased through the rocks and disappeared. There was no hate in me.

My right arm is completely numb now and my leg feels like a piece of cold stone. I could try to get to a pill, but it don't seem worth while. I doubt if it would help anyway,

with all the venom that's seeping through my veins toward my heart . . . I can't help wondering if I'll ever meet Cathy a long time from now in the hereafter . . . I wonder if she'll know me . . . if she'll know what I've done. . . . I hope to God she'll never know.

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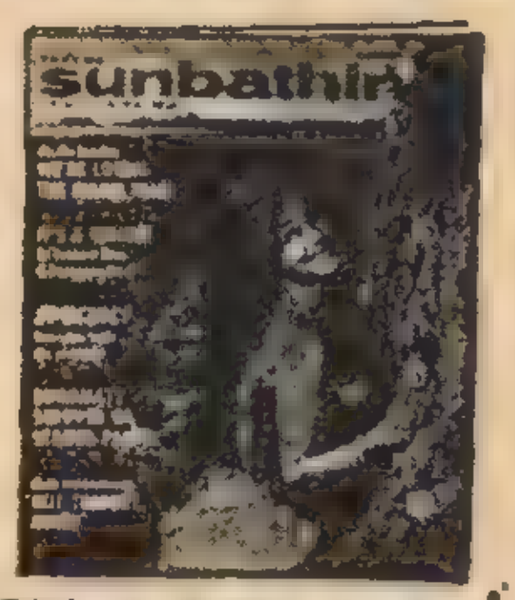

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"A time to live..."

They wanted her farm, her home. What could Anna do? She was a woman . . . and woman is weak.

BY VIC HENDRIX

Anna Rankin was watching out the kitchen window as her husband, Zack, eased the sputtering tractor into the farm yard. He climbed down from the narrow seat and slapped at the dust on his blue jeans. He untied the damp, soiled handkerchief around his neck and crammed it in his back pocket and crossed the bare piece of ground. He looked up and caught Anna's gaze; he coughed and spit in the dust at his feet; his return stare was cold and bitter. Is it that bad, Anna asked herself. She could feel the animosity in the air and she knew it was becoming worse with each day.

Zack stomped across the porch and yanked the screen door open; letting it slam shut behind him. Anna kept her back to him. He stared at her slender form for a moment then moved in beside her to splash his face at the sink. Then, she turned to the table to drop the onion she had sliced on his plate. As soon as he seated himself Anna took hot biscuits from the oven and began buttering them. He glanced quickly at her over his shoulder then hunched over his plate. "I got a load of lumber comin' in from town tomarrer," he said dully. "If I ain't here when they come with it have 'em stack it by the barn."

Lumber! Anna thought, Zack buying lumber?

He continued. "I have to build them Baineses a new cabin."

Anna turned to look at him, her

face void of expression. Zack's eyes met hers; they narrowed slightly. Then he said, "They just might move plumb outta the country . . . good farm workers is hard to come by." His voice became dry. "In spite what you say 'bout 'em them boys ain't in the least bit lazy." He filled his mouth again, chewed noisily, his thick throat working convulsively.

A new cabin for Jelly Baines! A strange smile crossed Anna's lips when she realized she wasn't surprised but only a little annoyed at herself for not realizing Zack was capable of building his young whore a house. The smile returned: Build his little whore a little house! Anna winced then, thoughts like these were new to her.

"I'm gonna build it right on top of the slope by the orchard."

Anna groaned silently. Not the orchard! Anguish ripped her body.

Not my orchard! Keep them down by the creek. Heaven help me, she moaned. In her mind she began tearing him to bits: Her work-strong fingers dug long, red rivulets down his cheeks; she beat her fists against his furry, broad chest. She spoke and was surprised at the smoothness of her voice: "I'm sure you would be pestered to death by them if they were that close to the house . . . you know how they are always following at your heels."

He cast her a suspicious look, then decided she was actually concerned. He pushed his chair away from the table with a loud scrape; his voice boomed. "Them boys know better than to bother me when I ain't in no social mood. . . . Ain't gonna be no problum there."

"I'd still think about it . . ." she said.

Zack interrupted. "Now let's don't git into no goddamn fight over it . . . I got my mind made up!"

He scowled at her and was disappointed when she failed to reply. It would help him to take his wrath out on someone—especially Anna. He lighted a cheap cigar and stepped out on the porch to smoke.

He had decided weeks ago to build Jelly a nice small house. It had come to him suddenly, and with the impact of a mule's kick, that Jelly might, at any time, attract another admirer. And, just now, the thought of Jelly's bared breasts being pawed by another man was almost driving him to despair. I'll put her little ass right up close to the house and then by damn let her try somethin'.

His stomach muscles tightened with remembering. Everything was forgotten: Anna, the cabin, the crops. Jelly's vision had hold of him as he climbed on the tractor to go back to the field.

Anna, deep in thought, didn't realize she had wandered about her house for hours; not until she went into the kitchen and saw the dishes left from lunch. She hurriedly

washed them, put more wood in the gleaming range, then started supper. When she was finished she stepped out onto the wide back porch. She lifted her head to the distant rumbling of thunder. The thick, wind-spread clouds reminded her of buttermilk. She stepped off the porch. There was only enough light to cast blurred shadows on the ground; hers was lean and hungry-looking. A rueful smile crossed the corners of her mouth as she realized she reminded herself of a sturdy pioneer. The picture of a prairie schooner with a woman striding behind in waist-high grass came to her. The smile turned to a grimace: the last thing on earth Anna wanted to be was a replica of seventy years ago. The rueful smile returned: A friend once remarked, "Anna you are the only person in the county who can come close to Betty Crocker." Nor did Anna want to be a "Betty Crocker". Anna wanted a new dress every few months. A church picnic every holiday. A bejeweled Christmas tree. Laughter . . . music . . . and most of all, people. Real, smiling happy people. Children running over the farm every Fourth of July with mouths full of red, crisp watermelon and pink juice dripping off their round little chins. Like it used to be . . . like it was a million years ago.

She ran her hands through her thick, dark brown hair, pulled back firmly and tied with a strip of gingham. The smile made another attempt to brush her mouth then faded away into taut lips.

She strolled to the edge of the farm yard and sat down on the weather-bleached bench circling an ancient apple tree. As she smoothed her faded denim skirt over her thighs she lifted her hands to look at them; then as if on cue they began trembling. She turned them palm up and stared; they were calloused and yellowish-colored. Then suddenly she flipped up her apron and buried them under the folds. A hot tear rolled down her cheek; she wiped it away with an angry fingertip. Now her hands were exposed again; thin, cold and quivering like something living apart from the rest of her body. Anna sighed deeply, her shoulders heaved. This was the third time today she had been weakened by a sudden spell of tremors. Was it a part of aging? Was it a symptom of an organ malfunctioning? She shocked herself by thinking: Who gives a good goddamn! Another tear burned her eye; she smeared it across her cheek Then suddenly she came to her feet as if prodded. Her thoughts became unruly. The hate! The anxiousness! And most of all, the anger and disgust she felt for herself.

Then after a few minutes of emotional distress she conquered her thoughts and cleared her mind. She lifted her face to the grey sky and remembered the "family's" eyes of being that same shade.

But she also pushed that thought away. Later she would reminise but not now . . . not with the dust from the tractor making a slow-moving cloud to the west of her big two-story farm house. She would bring back her gay, fun-loving father and brothers when the barely audible drone of the tractor's engine could not be heard to remind her of the black-eyed, cruel-mouthed Zack Rankin.

She stood still for a long moment then walked to the edge of the orchard. Slowly her eyes followed the sagging fence to the open field then to the creeping tractor. She could barely make out Zack wiping the dust from his face with his shirt sleeve. There would be no perspiration this time of year . . . just dust . . . dust that would wash out with very little rubbing. Then she would drop the shirt into the vat full of boiling water in the back yard. Watching him in the field below brought back her confused thoughts. Washing machine! Maytag. She had seen one in town, complete with gasoline engine. Maytags cost money. Money she had to quarrel with Zack about almost daily. Then hate made her throat tighten. Jelly Rose Baines, the dance hall in town, and the whiskey cost money too! Half-gallon jugs of illicit liquor that was delivered right to her scoured, lye-sweet smelling porch. Zack, hard-drinking man that he was, couldn't consume that much whiskey; it was mostly for the Baines', Jelly's brothers and their bar-fly girl friends. Anna's shoulders stiffened, a fierceness filled her eyes. Riffraff! Scum! Louts and sluts.

The name "Baines" struck terror in her heart. The thought of the uncouth, and sometimes their women, milling about her farm brought a tight hurt to her chest. Desperate tears filled her eyes once more. A Maytag to wash the good clean loam from his work clothes and the musky smell of Jelly Rose from the too-tight khakis he wore for dress.

The rueful smile twisted her mouth again. Do you have a real powerful scent Jelly? How many sniffs does Zack have to have before he is straining his britches? Do you ration the stimulant? A low moan escaped Anna's lips. This was the first time she had debased herself with thoughts like these. Her hands pressed against the sides of her face and she slowly gained control of her emotions. She watched the tractor for a few minutes more then walked back to the apple tree. Suddenly she became tired and weak and lifeless. She looked into the branches overhead and saw the strong sun-browned legs of her little-girlhood. She dropped her gaze to the time-worn bench and saw a basket of tumbled kittens that had been there eons ago. The little girl was singing and the kittens were making infant rumblings. The vision faded and Anna cried again.

Then deep twilight fell across, what was one time the most prosperous farm in the Verde Valley. Anna shuddered again and left the tall white-haired ghost of her father to stand guard over the land he had so loved. She left him to gaze with pride and awe at the towering pink and purple granite bluff that shaded the creek that was the west boundary of "Naegle's Place".

Anna stepped up on the porch and walked like a somnambulist into the kitchen. She lighted a lamp then backed out of the circle of light. She looked about as if she had expected something to have changed during her absence. Perhaps the smell of onions on the beef roast had become a little stronger; and the aroma of spices from the gingerbread was permeating the room but nothing had changed. It was quiet . . . deathly quiet. If only there was a clock ticking someplace. The stillness was choking her; she stared at the sink trying to bring the vision of two brawny brothers there dashing their faces with water. She hurried to the parlor and began lighting lamps. The glow melted the chill smothering her heart. Zack's forehead would twist into a scowl when he came into the house and saw the "waste" of kerosene. Anna's body heaved again as she remembered this; then, almost as if performing a ritual she blew out all the lamps except the one in the kitchen. She covered the canary's cage with a thin piece of muslin then sat down at the kitchen table. Zack might come back to the house tonight and if he did there was another meal waiting for him. And Zack could always engulf great quantities of food. Sometimes the promise of a hot bath and clean clothes was enough to lure him away from the Baines' unkempt and smelly cabin—if only for a few hours. His years on a wide, soft, clean bed in Anna's house had also spoiled him and he only spent an entire night at the cabin two or three times a week. The Baines' knotty mattresses and tattered bedclothes took too much out of the strong desire for Jelly so, except when he was drunk, all of their lovemaking was done under the stars on the river bank. Jelly running naked through the river-bank growth made his heart pound and his strong blood course through his body mightily. At this minute his throat was filled with emotion as thought of Jelly's cotton-colored that tossed in the wind like dandilion fuzz. The lingering womanly scent of her eighteen year old body filled his loins with hot pulsing blood. The thundering in his temples began crawling over him and filling him with a desire that matched his Cro-Magnon hulk. He switched off the tractor and struck out across the freshly plowed field. He was headed toward the river.

A few minutes later he was setting in the kitchen of the three room shack nestled in the river brush that

divided "Old Man Naegle's Place".

Jelly leaned over him. "I'm gonna take me a walk . . . I jus' might let you come with me."

And with the approving grins of her brothers she piroutted out the door, Zack at her heels. She dropped on her knees at the water's edge. Zack pulled her head back onto his lap and covered her throat with his large, loose mouth.

Jelly laughed softly. "You gonna make my new house real nice?"

"Nice as any you ever been in."

"That don't mean nothin'. I never been in a real nice house before . . . 'cept hers that time she went to Portersville." Jelly jumped to her feet. "My house gonna be as nice as that?"

Zack laughed. "That's the best house in fifty miles a here . . . I ain't a good enough carpenter fer that." He looked up at her and rubbed his chin. ". . . And besides, takes way to hell too much material." He pulled her down beside him on the silty bank. "Sides all you need's a room big enough fer a nice soft bed . . . a big bed."

"You quit makin' funna me Zack Rankin . . . an' I' better have me a nice house with real nice ceilin's and a purty, smooth floor." Her forehead wrinkled becomingly. "And I want me water right in the kitchen too."

She jumped up again, Zack grabbed her by the ankles and pulled her down across his thighs. He said, "All you need is a big lookin' glass . . . you don't need no sink 'cause you ain't gonna be washin' no dishes . . . not many anyway."

"What am I gonna do? Just march right up to her table and set myself down beside you and eat all that fancy cookin' . . . an' I guess I'm supposed to march right out agin with you leadin' the way right down here to this goddamn river bottom." her soft lips trembled. "She's a damn fool bitch Zack, but she ain't gonna let you do nothin' fer me."

"She don't have no say 'bout what I do . . . she don't ask me nothing." Zack said, sullenly.

"That just goes to show how she don't care 'bout you like I do." She writhed in his arms until her breasts rested against his throat.

"Someday I'm gonna git full up with her havin' everything an' me nothin' an' I'm gonna catch me a ride to Portersville an' git me a job."

Zack held her at arms length, then slapped her across the cheek. She whimpered. A tiny spot of moonlight caught in her hair. Zack's throat swelled at the sight.

"Go ahead," she said, "whip me good . . . make me blue all over . . . but still, one of these days I'll git to thinkin' 'bout her havin' everything and that big house and I'll plumb leave this valley."

She sobbed one more time then cuddled against him and lay quietly as he pulled her cotton sweater over her shoulders. When he began tug-

ging at her at her tight, cut-off jeans she hardened her body against him.

"Maybe," she said, "you'd better go back home and sleep with Anna . . . Maybe you'd better show *her* what a big man you are." Her bottom lip trembled invitingly. "I don't think I want anything from you anymore . . . If'n I can't have as much as her I don't want nothing."

His voice was tremulous, but husky. "Just you keep still . . . don't be mean. I'm gonna make a little doll baby outta you: Nice little dresses and little hats and gloves and beads . . ."

"And! And! And! Now I'll tell you what! You'll lay me in the thickets and you'll hold me on your lap while you swizzle likker and play poker with Matt and Big Pete and you'll git drunk and crawl in my bed but you ain't never gonna be by me like you are by her!" Her eyes filled with tears. "And that's just 'cause you think she's got class . . . she ain't got no class. Just because she had this big farm when you married her don't make her no better than me. . . . My rear would make her a Sunday face and you know it Zack Rankin!"

His mouth covered hers. Her fingers dug into his back. She said, "Someday you're gonna make me pregnut and then I'll walk right outta this valley and marry me a fact'ry worker . . . I ain't never gonna have no trouble finding me a guy that'll buy me dresses and beads . . ."

He slapped her again; she whimpered and clung to him.

"Go ahead," she said, sadly, ". . . beat me up but you know it's gonna happen. You *know* it's gonna happen! I'll sure 'nough git pregnut by you but I'll find me a husband 'cause I ain't never havin' me no bastard kid even if the Lord Hisself is the daddy."

"Jelly, fer chrissake I'm doing the best I can. Rome weren't built in no day and I just can't say to Anna: "You gotta go away and leave me this farm 'cause I got me a cute little doll baby that smells good and wiggles like a cute little puppy."

Jelly laughed softly and snuggled nearer." Naw, you can't say that . . . she'd fill her pants."

Next day a farm yard noise awakened Anna; she eased her aching body out of bed and went to look out the window. It was almost noon. That was good: she had had about seven hours of undisturbed sleep. She would have to hurry, fix dinner and put the milk away.

Matt, Jelly's brother, who creeped around like an ill-bred ghoul, would be through with the chores. Anna shuddered: Leaches, Vultures and Baines'. The very thought of them filled her with dread.

The sound of a big flat-rock truck lugging into the yard brought back the painful memory of yesterday's conversation: A house for Jel-

ly right on the edge of the orchard! A house for Jelly that could be seen from Anna's upstairs bedroom, and even from the kitchen porch. Jelly would be running into the barn for eggs; her pale hair flowing behind her like a tiny silver cloud; her strong young legs would be taking her all over Anna's farm. The farm that was being defiled by the flagrant lovemaking and drinking and gambling and the foul mouths of the unholy four. A sad smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. Unholy Four . . . Anna Naegle you are becoming something of a poetess. Unholy Four.

Her smile widened and she went down the stiars to the kitchen. A scratch reminded her that the old shaggy dog had not been fed. Ancient and wobbly and the only pet left on the farm that had been alive at the time of Anna's brothers' tragic death five years ago. Five years . . . five hundred years, Anna winced as she remembered the upset raft in the thick, brown flood waters that ravaged the snug little valley. No graves, no markers; only the treasured memory of two strong brothers who never returned from the rescuing mission of stranded women and children along the unpredictable Verde River.

A hot tear fell on her cheek. Both men had left sweethearts that grieved, whithered and then bloomed again. And they also left Anna to run the farm that needed the full time of two broad backs.

She tore the memory of the fast courtship of Zack from her mind.

Anna's marriage to Zack Rankin was still being called "Anna's Folly" by everyone in the valley. The Baptist minister himself said Anna was the last woman on earth he thought would get man-hungry enough to marry Zack Rankin.

No one had known for sure where Zack had come from. He just appeared in town one day and from then on worked for first one farmer and the other. Anna, by hiring him, then marrying him had marked herself as the most gullible woman who had ever breathed fresh air. A foolish twenty-five year old who would sell her soul for a man's back to warm. Not one of the villagers had stopped to think that perhaps Anna hadn't heard the tales that were buzzing up and down the valley about the brawny, good-looking man who had lifted the burden of her farm off her shoulders. And Zack Rankin had done just that and ever so gently. Even his worst enemy would have to admit that Zack Rankin had a deep love for "Old Man Naegle's Place". Anna had been hornswoggled and was only one hour, after he had slipped the ring on her finger, discovering it. At the same time he had revealed his true self. Zack had raped her on the evening of her wedding.

He had pulled the pickup to the side of the road almost within sight of the village and in spite of her

tearful protests he half carried and half dragged her into the thicket that edged the road. Then after two hours of drinking he busted in her bedroom door and for another hour he submitted her to shame she never dreamed existed. Then for the years following it had been Anna hurrying the days along so she could dread the next. But now, she was anxious for another full night's sleep. She needed the rest to sharpen her wits and strengthen her body. The battle had began and her foe was formidable; her armor inpenatrable. There would be no house built for Jelly at the edge of the orchard! Not for Jelly or anyone else. Zack can have Jelly's pulsing young body and the comradeship of her obscene brothers, but not within sight of my house, Anna thought. Then suddenly the self-control she had gathered about her protectively vanished. The trembling began in her lips and then coursed over her body; her heart began its secret ritual of rapid beating; but these palpitations no longer frightened her. It was caused by fear; a deep-seated thing that had burrowed far back in the silent walls of her subconscious. Then, joining the strength-sapping trembling, came the twin affliction, anger, bringing back the squareness of her shoulders. The lean cords of her jaws twitched; her stomach muscles tightened. She could feel her frame stretching. Taller, taller. Angrier. Her eyes narrowed.

Stiff and jerky, she prepared a quick noon meal, fed the dog and sat down to wait for the cavernous-mouthed man whose face would be farmed by a greasy, blue-bearded chin. In a few minutes he would be sucking food particles from between his powerful teeth. Anna could almost hear the obscene, wet sounds. Her stomach knotted at the thought. She knew she would set through the meal calmly, sipping her coffee. She had learned to bring an impassiveness to her face and hold it there.

Then his heavy-booted steps quaked the back porch. Anna looked up as he pulled the screen aside. She could tell from the clothes he was wearing that he had gone straight to the fields after spending the night at the Baines' cabin. He sometimes did that. He only came to the house to fill up on Anna's cooking and to bathe and get fresh clothes. She had been tempted many times to fail to provide Zack with those little luxuries to see if he would spend even more time away from the house; but knowing his evilness she never worked up the courage. When Anna crossed her bull-necked husband he invariably managed to strike back in some cruel manner. One time when she had stood up to him he had, later, taken her brother's guns and sold them for almost nothing. That had been his way of conquering her. The time she had rebelled against his letting the Baines'

move into the old sharecroppers shack resulted in his selling her prize-winning Black Angus bull.

From the mean look on his face when he yanked the chair from the table and seated himself a new terror struck her heart. She knew it would be only a few minutes before he would throw another ultimatum at her feet. She slipped the crisp porkchop on his plate and stood back waiting for his eyes to meet hers. He grunted then lifted his face to stare at her smooth hair and classic features. Their eyes locked, Anna knew the time had come.

He said, "You know . . I feel kinda sorry for that Baines' kid. Seems a shame she had . . ." His voice trailed, he swallowed, then continued. "I been thinking . . . might be a good idea to make that new cabin a mite bigger than I first planned. . . . Might as well order some more lumber and while I'm at it I'll just have the windows and doors made up at the mill . . ." He finally dropped his gaze. "I'll save me a heap of work . . . be worth it in the long run."

A cold silent laugh paralyzed Anna's throat. He's telling me he has to make the cabin extra nice for Jelly. Zack's voice came from someplace black and ugly.

"I heard she had a fellow comin' all the way from Toltown to see her."

Anna's voice was dead. "Well, that's nice. It could possibly save you some work. She'll be getting married one of these days and now you won't be obligated to make the cabin with more than three rooms."

His eyes narrowed, his throat worked in anger but he remained silent.

All the cash money was still under her thumb; and again he hated himself for not knowing about it sooner . . . at the time, the farm had been his target . . . money hadn't entered into it. Cold cash and it would have been his just for the writing of a check. He had been a fool for not handling his honeymoon differently. But it was too late now. He couldn't sell any more of the equipment or stock—not unless he absolutely had to. Jelly was real sweet though; she was willing to wait until a crop was sold before she demanded much from him: Like the ninety dollar wrist watch she had cajoled out of him a few weeks before. And she had had it only a few days when she busted the mainspring on it.

Anna put another porkchop on his plate; he pushed it away. "Can't eat another one of them greasy things. You sure are fallin' down on yer cookin'." He glared at her. "Not much of anything you do any more but go around in a half-ass daze is there?"

Anna was ready. The sullen, looselipped complaint was only the opener.

He said, "I'd better git me some help with that buildin' . . . "His hatefilled glare eat through her." I

gotta git this place back on its feet. Them Baines' just might pull out anytime far as that goes and I'll have to have a fittin' place fer the next man. Decent man won't even consider workin' fer me if I ain't got a place fer his kids."

The ghost laugh filled Anna's throat again. The fool . . . the ignorant fool.

Does he actually think I can't see right through his scheme? His stupidity made her sick to her stomach. Zack knew the Baines' would never leave. Jelly had no boy friend. Zack would beat a rival to a bloody mess. *And* Jelly wanted nothing but Zack Rankin and Anna's farm. Jelly would never, not now, settle for less than every inch of the "Naegle Place".

Anna pulled her chin tight and said: "I'll say nothing about the money the new cabin will cost . . . but under no circumstance will it be built by the orchard." She could feel the cold hate of Zack's eyes on her face. She turned her head. "It will have to be down by the creek . . . or you'll just have to forget the whole thing."

Zack jumped to his feet; the chair crashed to the floor. "I'm putting it where I goddamn well please. I'm the man here and I make the plans." His words were slurred with contempt; his hands hardened into fists. "Any time you don't like what I do around here you just pack yer things and git yer ass right outta here!"

Anna knew she had gone too far; now it was in the open. She turned her back to him so he couldn't see the white line forming across her taut upper lip. Zack's hand tangled in her hair, he then slapped her cruelly across the face. Her knees gave way and as she started to drop Zack yanked her up-right and hit her again in the face. The fingers of his other hand digging into her shoulder brought another flash of pain. More mental than physical.

His voice was thick and slurred with hate." I'm sick of yer face . . . I'm sicka everything 'bout you! You wouldn't by any chance do me a favor and take a big dose of rat poison would you?"

Anna kept her lips sealed tightly. Poison! Poison! She shuddered. She pulled her shoulders higher. Her contempt burned deeper than her fear. She braced her body for the blows to follow . . . none came. Zack released her; he was leaving the room.

She sat at the table and as she rubbed her aching face her eyes fastened on the small sharp knife laying beside the plate. She shuddered again. Anna, at that moment, was capable of murder. Then the painful howl and terrifying scream from the feeble old dog outside brought her to her feet. She ran to the door. Zack was walking away from the furry form in the back yard. Anna ran to the dog and dropped to her knees in the dust and chips by the wood pile. The dog

was dead; the top of his skull had been smashed with the ax, now imbedded in the chopping stump. She slowly brushed at the flies that were already beginning to light on the gaping wound. She stared at her blood-smeared hand. What did it mean?

She looked up when Zack's huge form shadowed the ground in front of her. In his eyes she read the message: Perhaps he didn't realize it himself but he had given her an omen. He let her know he was a murderer. He could kill. And he would kill for a glowing sun-tanned face, an appealing pug nose, and a mop of silver-blonde hair.

"That old sonofabitch tried to bite me." Zack muttered thickly. ". . . and Zack Rankin ain't takin' that from no goddamned mutt. Never liked the old bastard anyway . . . Hate to have to put up with something I don't like."

Anna came to her feet slowly. The terror was real now: Not imagined . . . not an unstable part of her imagination. Zack was being crude and ugly but he had made his point.

She turned and went back into the house. Her thoughts were like a tiny tornado . . . twisting, churning, not making reason. She dropped on her bed and cried until her face was red and swollen. Then she gained control of herself and stepped out into the, now, moonlight flooded night. The old dog was still lying by the wood pile. She rubbed her hands over her eyes trying to clear the fog away. The haze wouldn't lift. Her fear increased. The flies had blown the crusted wound. She went to the pump and drew a bucket of water and cleansed the wound. Then she went to the kitchen for a table cloth and after she had wrapped the dog in it she carried her gruesome bundle up the stairs to her bedroom. She lay her bundle on the floor and turned back the bedspread; then she gently lifted the old dog and laid him out on her clean white sheet and pulled the covers over him.

Then she went back down the stairs and into the barn for a shovel. She dug a small hole and filled it with tin cans from the trash pile and then she spread the left over dirt around to make it appear a larger hole had been dug.

She spent the next four hours in her bedroom rocking steadily. She stopped when she heard the cough and sputter of the pickup's engine as it came to a stop in the yard. She was standing by the window looking over the wood lot when Zack walked over to inspect the grave. Anna could see the flash of white teeth as he grinned. Her heart pounded until she thought she would have a stroke. Murderer! Killer! A memory stunned her: It had only been three years since a neighboring farmer had beat his wife to death with an ax and then thrown the corpse into a cistern to

decay. Jelly's lover was a murderer!

Anna waited until Zack was asleep, then she eased into his room. She stood looking down at him calmly for a few moments. A strange smile played over her face as she eased down on the side of the bed and removed her house slippers. It wasn't until she pulled her nightgown over her head that the convulsions struck her. She waited until it passed then she carefully eased in beside her sleeping husband. He stirred, Anna held her breath. His snoring continued. She lay there, wide-eyed and barely breathing, and waited!

The sound of jays quarreling in the tree outside the window brought Zack out of his sleep. He yawned and flung his arms wide; he felt Anna beside him. He stared at her closed eyes in disbelief; his face turning ugly. He jumped out of bed and leaned over to shake her. She fluttered her eyelids, opened them and smiled.

Zack said, loudly, "What in the hell are you celebratin'?"

Anna sat up in bed, unashamed and eager. His eyes fell on her bare uplifted breasts. Anna Naegle, mother-naked in front of him filled him with apprehension. A phantom-like stuffiness engulfed him. He pulled on his jeans without taking his eyes off her naked bosom. She eased out of bed and held her long arms out to him, gracefully.

"I don't know what you're up to," he said, "but what ever it is . . . I'm not fallin' fer it!"

She laughed softly, "I thought you were a real he-man . . . nobody but a little boy could stand there and stare like that."

Her soft laughter followed him as he hurried down the stairs and out the back door. In his haste to get away he flooded the engine. He jumped out of the pickup and hurried across the freshly plowed field. He stopped at the creek and sat down to get his breath. Then he reasoned it out; a sarcastic smirk twisted his face. Wasn't nothin' to it. His wife had finally decided she had to fulfill a few of mother-nature's demands . . . Was fittin' and nat'rul for a woman to go so long without, that she got to a certain point . . . and got recklus as a sonofabitch. Then he laughed, said aloud. "Guess me bashin' that mutt's head in showed her who the real boss is 'round here."

Then another thought came to Zack: Anna had been in bed with him . . . for hours maybe. Maybe all he'd had to do was turn over. She, a long time ago, had put up a pretty good fight. Tonight, he decided, he would have another go at it. Good old Anna . . . it's time she knowed what side her bread was buttered on. Tonight! Why the hell wait 'til tonight. He hurried back to the house.

Anna saw him coming and it was unfolding just like she knew it

would. She was standing in the kitchen stark naked when he stepped in the door. The shock of seeing her like that weakened him. Anna, the Prude . . . Anna, the Elegant, standing in the middle of the world without a stitch on, the curtains wide, whipping a bowl of egg whites was unbelieveable. Zack closed the door softly behind him and stood staring at the milky white body, slender and ethereal. She took a step toward him, mixing bowl in hand. "I'm making an angel's food cake . . . I have to feed the angels." She lowered her head demurely. "I guess it seems silly to make a cake for that old dog." Her eyes widened as if she was surprized at Zack's gaping open-mouthed.

"I'll save you some." She said softly, a low chuckle came from her throat. "Maybe I'd better make you an apple pie."

Zack backed out the door. The truth staggered him: Anna's gone batty! I shouldna killed that goddamed dog. She loved that old dog. I gotta go someplace and figger this thing out. Christ! Anna's plumb nuts . . . but hell's fire a woman just don't go crazy over night!

Christ, them things just don't happen. No sir!

Zack was setting by the creek staring off into space when Jelly found him.

"I been lookin' all over for you," she said, "We're ready for you to help us start the new house."

His eyes met hers slowly but his words were hurried. "Somethin's come up an' the buildin' will just have to go fer a spell."

Jelly's eyes sparkled angrily, she slapped her hands on her hips. "Zack Rankin . . . I'm not gonna take much more offa you. My brother's already got the lumber moved down to the orchard while you been off hidin' from us."

"Now, I ain't been hidin'." Then he remembered. "Did they see anything . . . anything goin' on at the house?"

"They wasn't lookin' fer nothin' . . . what do you mean, anyway. What's the matter with you?" Now she seemed more dismayed than angry. "Was they supposed to see something?"

"Fergit it." Zack said, coming to his feet; and almost trotting, he left Jelly standing there.

She screamed after him. "Zack don't you go off an' leave me like this . . . you'll be sorry! Come back here, damn you!"

Two days later Zack appeared at the back door. Anna was at the sink singing a tuneless little song. He eased the door open and stepped in. He released his breath, relieved; Anna was fully clothed.

"Hello, stranger," she called gaily, over his shoulder. Zack instantly became suspicious: Anna singing? Anna being friendly? He stepped nearer, looked into the mixing bowl in front of her expecting to see frothy egg whites; instead,

the bowl was empty. A knot formed in the pit of his stomach. He stepped back as she continued beating inside the empty bowl.

He sat at the table and stared at her. For fortyeight hours he had argued with himself and decided most of the change in Anna had been in his own mind but now after seeing the beaters whirl inside an empty bowl he was no longer unsure. Anna was insane! Crazy as a loon! He was trying to make up his mind whether to stay and see what happened next or to get up and leave when Anna placed a cup of steaming coffee in front of him. She had done this hundreds of times before but this time it was different. She was making a ritual of it. He pushed the chair back and came to his feet, never once taking his eyes off her straight back. Anna placed the empty bowl on the table carefully as if it was brimful of something. Then delicately she flicked a tiny spot off the rim. "Now, there," she said. Then, singing again, she opened the door to the seldom used dining room that separated the kitchen from the hall and parlor. A sickening-sweet assailed Zack's nostrils as it filled the warm kitchen.

"What in the hell is that?" he blurted.

Anna's voice was soft. "What in the hell is what?"

"That stink! What is it?" Zack was becoming angry without realizing it. For the moment Anna's sudden strangeness was forgotten. "Get rid of it."

Anna sniffed the air. Zack was gone, the door slammed shut behind him.

The moon was hidden behind a cloud as Zack eased his large frame, cat-like, up to the window in front of the house. Anna was sitting in her rocker, rocking slowly back and forth. Her lips formed the strange smile. After a few minutes she stood before the long framed mirror in the hall. Zack watched her every move through the windows. She danced a few gay steps, stopped, frowned in a perplexed manner, then stepped to the canary's cage, lifted the cloth cover and whistled softly. The bird lifted it's head. Anna opend the door and lifted the bird off its perch. The strange smile crossed her face, then she held the bird to her lips gingerly, again and again. She stroked the tiny head with the tip of her fingers. Still smiling she went to her sewing box and with her teeth broke off a short piece of pink yarn; and looped it around the canary's neck. And then slowly she pulled both ends; the bird fluttered wildly for a moment, then it was still. Tiny yellow feathers fluttered to the floor. Anna held the lifeless bird up to the light and humming softly she swung it back and forth. Dangling on the yarn, the little fluff of ruffled feathers reflected the lamp's light.

Zack stumbled blindly out into

the night; his heart pounding, his mouth dry. Was it only in his mind . . . or was the smell from in the housing seeping out?

The next night he was back. The front room was dark so he slipped up to the kitchen window. Anna was sitting at the table reading. A calm expression softened her face. Her hair had been brushed for the night and she was dressed for bed. Zack waited. Anna continued reading. Zack tried to identify the odor coming out to him from inside the house. This time it was real. After a few minutes Anna closed the book and went out into the darkness. Zack watched her until she was out of sight among the trees in the orchard; then he rushed into the house. The odor brought a vomiting lurch to his stomach; but holding his breath he followed the scent. He had to know! When he realized the smell was coming from upstairs he quickened his step. He didn't want to be in the house when Anna came back. He wanted to see what was going on and then get out. Maybe he'd come back with the sheriff. Anna was going to have to be put away. And then he and Jelly . . . he pushed the thought from his mind. Too goddamned good to be true: Anna crazy and being put away. The farm would be his . . . every last inch of it . . . His and Jelly's! Can't duhvorce no nutty woman but then by damn no crazy woman could handle runnin' a big farm either. Git her put away and be made her . . . her . . . gardeen. That's it!

Zack fought back the nausea crowding his throat and opened the door to Anna's bedroom.

Proof was what he was after. Proof that Anna was balmy! Old Mam Naegle's place was, by god, his now! Zack Rankin's!

The odor was taking his breath but he lighted the lamp, snatched his handcherchief from his back pocket and held it over his nose. There on Anna's bed was the dog's decaying carcass; and right beside it was the dead canary; a stale angel food cake was on the night stand. Zack backed out of the room and ran down the stairs.

Anna was watching from the moonlighted shadow of the barn. She stayed in the blackness of the thick shrubs and followed Zack as he hurried to the Baines' cabin.

When he was inside she slipped up to the door and listened.

Zack's voice was strained with excitement. "I tell you she's pract'ly a lunitic. Now all I have to do is git the state to put her away."

There was a murmer of three voices then Zack continued: "The sheriff'll have to git a good strong whiff of that dead dog before'll believe me . . . but you'd better believe I'm gonna git him out here first thing in the mornin'."

One of the Baines men said, "Think he'll take her back to town with 'em?"

Zack answered." The sonofabitch

had *better* take her back with 'em."

"I don't think I'd ever want to live in a house that oncet had a crazy woman in it." Jelly said, stubbornly.

"Shet yer mouth Sissy . . . that's a real fine house—dead dogs an' all."

"Well, I'll just live in my new house when you lazy jackasses git 'round to buildin' it." Jelly answered. "Besides, I ain't smelled no dead dogs yet . . . an' I ain't so sure I wanna b'lieve there's one up there in that nice pretty bedroom."

"Well, it's there all right . . . jus' like I said. Its cake is right there beside it." Zack said, his voice surprizingly soft. ". . . And that little old yeller bird is layin' right there on the pillow beside it."

Jelly made a mewing sound and her hands clutched her throat. "Ain't nobody gonna make me live in that house even if it does have eight rooms."

Anna removed a quart fruit jar from her housecoat pocket and sat it on the front step of the cabin then hurried back to her house.

She threw every window open on both floors. She put on gallons of water to heat and pulled out four big bottles of disinfectant from under the sink. In another few minutes the house was filled with medicated steam; and Anna was working quickly.

Next morning she was watching the road when Zack hurried past in the pickup on his way to town. His head turned to the house for a quick glimpse and then he kept his eyes glued to the road the rest of the way.

The quart jar was on the seat beside him. It contained a small black object floating in clear liquid.

Zack was trying to hide his excitement as he pulled his truck into the yard behind the county patrol car. The sheriff looked up ashamedly as Anna came to meet them. She said, "Why, sheriff . . . I wasn't expecting you." Then to Zack, "You're home early."

"How are you feeling Anna?" the sheriff asked, as his eyes went from her shining, neatly combed hair to her clean starched dress.

"I'm very well, thank you," she said. Her eyebrows drew together in a slight frown.

The sheriff was quick to sense the suspicion crossing Anna's face. "Just thought I'd drop in for a piece of that famous apple pie of yours."

Anna stood silently; her hands went to her hips and a smile played around her lips.

"My old lady's fergot her manners sheriff. Like I done told you, she ain't been herself lately." Ignoring Anna, he said, "Come on into the house."

Just the right amount of time passed before Anna said: "Zack, what are you up to? The sheriff isn't here on a social call. I've known Jim Talley all my life and he's got something on his mind other than apple pie."

Sheriff Talley's eyes met An-

na's. "Anna, Zack thinks you've been working too hard . . . that's all."

"I don't care what Zack thinks . . . you two are up to something and I want to know what it is right now." She brought an angry glare to her face. "And sheriff, I think you already know that it isn't like Zack to worry about my welfare . . . We've certainly not been seeing things eye to eye but I can't see that he should bring outsiders into it."

The sheriff rubbed his chin and stepped up onto the porch and sniffed; then he shot a questioning look at Zack. Zack shrugged. The sheriff then went into the cherry-sweet smelling kitchen; the bright frilly curtains danced in the breeze. The fresh apple pies cooling in the window were picture book perfect. The sheriff studied Anna's face for a long minute. She returned his gaze with just the right amount of perplexion narrowing her eyes.

Wordlessly the sheriff went into the living room and looked about for the canary's cage. Zack was behind him; his nostrils flared, trying to bring back to sickly-sweet smell. Then he sniffed loudly. The sheriff looked at him disgustedly and grunted before he started up the stairs. Zack stayed behind, he whirled and glared venomously at Anna. A smile crossed her lips.

Hoarsely, Zack whispered. "I seen that dead dog and I smelled it . . . what did you do with it?"

"Do with what Zack?"

"That sonofabitching dog!"

"If you're talking about Old Beau I buried him right out there in the wood lot where you killed him."

Her voice was calm and smooth. "Did you tell the sheriff how the poor old thing died? Did you tell him Zack, that you split his skull with the ax?"

The sheriff came down the stairs two at a time; his face was flushed and he was thoroughly angry. "Zack Rankin . . . . I knew you was one big-mouthed fool but I didn't know you was as big a one as you've just proved yourself to be . . . If there's a rotting dog carcass in Anna's room I'll eat it. I never seen a nicer, cleaner room than that one."

Anna gasped. "Jim Talley, what are you saying!"

The sheriff, red faced, replied. "You might as well know what this stupid fool had been up to. He came into my office all out of breath and bellering about you being sick . . . That's what he said: 'Sick . . . real sick in the head,' said you had that old dog of yours all laid out in your own bed . . . . with a bird keeping him company—damned dead bird at that."

Anna's hand flew to her mouth. "Zack!"

Zack was frantic. He grabbed the sheriff by the arm. "I'm telling the truth so help me God . . . I seen it with my own eyes. They had a cake and everything . . . jus' like I said. Real angel cake fer angels."

The sheriff shook Zack loose and

controlled his own anger. "All right Zack, I'm giving you just twenty minutes to sober up in before I leave . . . . I wouldn't think of leaving Anna to have to take care of you by herself." A new thought came to him. "That's what comes from drinking that rot-gut they make out in the woods."

"What I ought to do is take you back to town and let you dry out for a couple days."

Zack grabbed the sheriff's arm again. "I tell you she's crazy . . . . I seen her making cakes where there wasn't none . . . . I seen her kill that yeller bird . . . . I was looking in the window . . . . I was watchin' her!"

Anna gasped again. The sheriff shook Zack loose, then rested his hand on her shoulder reassuringly. Zack continued, his voice breaking. "I woke up one mornin' and she . . ." he pointed at Anna, ". . . was in bed with me!"

The sheriff's eyebrows knitted. He rubbed his hand across his chin. He was over his anger; Zack had to be humoured. "What's so all fired strange 'bout a man waking up and finding his wife in bed with him?"

Zack was purple with rage, he stammered. "Nothing' I guess, but she was stark naked."

Anna gasped again. The sheriff's face flushed, "Zack," he said, "you'd better hit the hay and try to sleep this one off."

"I had one swaller . . . one goda-mighty swaller! I ain't drunk!" Then he remembered the jar. "What 'bout that jar? Whatta 'bout it!" He hurried to the pickup and brought back the jar the sheriff had put in a paper sack in his office. By this time the sheriff and Anna were stepping off the porch. Zack handed the sack to the sheriff and Anna took it from his hand and lifted the jar out. She screamed and dropped it to the ground. "What is it?" she cried.

The sheriff grimaced painfully. "It's a pickled bat . . . the pink thing is a ribbon tied around it's neck."

"Why, that's sinful . . . who'd fix up something like that?"

The sheriff glared at Zack. "Ask him."

Anna's look of pity was real, she shook her head slowly from side to side.

"Think you can handle him Anna?" the sheriff asked.

Zack walked out of the yard cursing under his breath.

"Why," Anna said, "I've been doing nicely for several years Jim."

The sheriff grinned. "I shoulda known better than to have paid any mind to Zack." With a wave of his hand he went to his car. Anna raised her own hand as he circled and drove away.

A few minutes later Zack stormed into the house; he grabbed Anna by the arm and swung her around to face him. "You made a fool outta me . . . an' I ain't takin' that lightly. What the hell are you up to?"

Her voice was low and sweet.

Zack . . . I couldn't tell the sheriff everything. How would it sound for me to tell him my poor old dog *was* sleeping in my bed." She reached for him, he backed away. She smiled up at her husband. "And as far as the rest of it goes . . . well, he wouldn't have understood any of it. And tonight when we are all together: My father . . . Old Beau . . . me and you." She became excited, "I'll have to dig them both up again." Then her voice trailed. "I didn't really mind when you bashed his head in. I dreamed about it just the night before it happened.

"Last night I dreamed I took the ax and caved in Jelly's head." Her voice became even softer. "We'll put her in *your* bed . . . you'll get used to the smell." Her forehead wrinkled, she was in deep thought, then she said, "Jelly will change more than old Beau did . . . her pretty golden hair will slip right out of her scalp and her big blue eyes will just shrivel right up inside her head . . ."

Zack released his hold on her. Anna sighed deeply and said, "But she'll be right here in the house where we can watch her . . . and take care of her . . . Helpless little thing needs us."

Zack heard no more; he stumbled out the door and jumped in the pickup; the dust and gravel clouded as he spun around and sped down the road.

Thirty minutes later the truck, loaded with all of the Baines' possessions, was speeding down the country road toward town. The Baines men had turned their heads to look at the farm house as they passed by but Jelly closed her eyes, huddled against Zack and whimpered. Naegle's place had seen the last of them.

Anna went to the bench under the old apple tree and sat down. Her hands were no longer trembling and the two small tears that slipped down her cheeks were for the little bit of yellow fluff that had been chosen for a sacrifice when Anna had seen the shadow Zack was making on the trunk of the chinaberry tree the night he was spying on her through the window.

Tomorrow she would go into town and tell Jim Talley Zack had deserted her and run off with that silly little Jelly Baines. Then she would go to Portersville and see an attorney. Desertion was grounds enough. Then she would take enough money out of the bank to buy one of those new Ford Coupes and a gasoline-powered Maytag. The holidays were coming on. A woman alone had to get out and mingle with old friends this time of year. Maybe Doc Andrews, the vet, would sell her one of his springer spaniel puppies.

Mr. Sosa was in love. And we all know that love is blind. It took a thief to bring Mr. Sosa to his senses.

BY

XAVIER SAN LUIS REY

JOSE ENRIQUE SOSA was a Cubano who had led a simple and uneventful life for fifty two years. Then, one very tragic day, he fell in love.

Perhaps he might never have been aquainted with trouble if Zoraida, a corpulent widow, had not also been the target for Cupid's mischievous bow. Almost from the start of the romance she made it perfectly clear that she expected the affair to end in matrimony.

"Work hard, Jose, and save your money," she told him, "and soon we will celebrate the beautiful night of our boda."

As a consequence Jose began to work harder than he ever had be-

LOVE A THIEF AND SALVATION

fore. Rather than continue with the small cart he always hired on a weekly basis he went and bought a new and larger one instead, loaded it with twice the amount of fruits and vegetables he normally carried, and pushing and struggling and sweating as he pushed the cart through Habana's narrow streets he would cry:

"I got platanos maduros, boniato, papas, mangos. I got pretty frutas for sale."

Every night, after completing his rounds, Jose would visit his beloved Zoraida. "Aye, my little pidgeon," he often told her. "How terribly hard I have worked this day. I think there is not a peaceful bone in my ancient body."

Zoraida always proved sympathetic. "Aye, Joseito, mi cielo," she would say, stroking his bald head gently. "Are you really so tired?"

"Indeed I am, mi corazon. My feet are rebellious they have walked so much. One day, I fear, they will refuse to take another step."

But no matter how wearisome the sacrifice Jose was determined to bring his sweetheart's wishes to a proper and happy end, and so each morning he would rise early to sell his vegetables and frutas in the street.

Then, one day:

"Aye, Zoraida. Perdoname. You must forgive me, but today I can give you no more than eighty cents."

"Eighty cents, Joseito? But why? Did we not agree to save at least two pesos a day towards our boda?"

"Yes, but when I arrived at the market this morning to buy the vegetables I discovered I was short of money. I do not understand it, Zoraida. I will swear on the bones of my grandmother that when I went to bed last night I had more than seven pesos."

The following evening was a sad repetition of the day before: the amount of money turned over to Zoraida augmented their savings by a mere fifty cents, and Jose repeated the story:

"I will swear on the head of San Lazaro that last night when I went to bed I had . . ."

The disappointment on Zoraida's face grew darker each time Jose appeared and would say: "I just cannot understand it, my little pidgeon. A large portion of my daily profit seems to be disappearing into thin air. I will swear that when I went to bed last night I had. . . ."

Finally, Jose decided to adopt a firm and what he hoped would be a problem-solving resolution: that very night he would place an extra lock on his door. A huge bull-dog lock. Since he lived in a boarding house on Neptuna street his hammering attracted the landlady.

"May I ask why you are making so much noise, Senor Sosa? Do you realize it is eleven o'clock in the evening? You're waking up the whole house. What on earth are you doing?"

"I am putting an extra lock on my door. I have good reason to believe that I am being robbed and I am a poor man and cannot afford to be victimized by thieves."

"Robbed? Hmph! Your room is hardly the Banco Nacional, Senor Sosa. In any event, you might at least ask permission to tear the door apart."

With or without permission Jose was determined to finish the task and put an end to the thefts. Once done, he secured the door and counted his money.

"Let me see now," he thought, and wet his thumb. "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine." He smiled. He had nine pesos and forty three centavos. It had not been a bad day at all. The next day he could afford to give Zoraida four pesos to add to their savings.

Replacing the money in his wallet and the wallet in the hip pocket of his trousers he folded them carefully and lay them on a chair. Then he undressed and climbed into bed. The sneak thief would profit nothing from him this night, he thought, but when he awoke:

"Hmm. Let me see now. I should have nine pesos and forty three centavos. Yes, that was the figure . . . three, four, five, six." Jose paled. "But . . ." Dios mio! He had been robbed again! And in spite of the lock!

That night, when he explained to Zoraida:

"I want to believe you, Jose, but I'm afraid I'm beginning to doubt your word. I think you're lying to me because you are no longer interested in enjoying the fruits of our boda."

Jose was a deeply troubled man. Somehow, some way, he had to put an end to the robberies. If he didn't he was bound to lose his beloved Zoraida. So, that night:

"Senor Sosa! What on earth are you doing! Why are you making all that noise?" It was the landlady again. She was scowling at him from the window of her apartment. It faced his room across the courtyard.

"I am putting bars on my window," he explained. "I have come to the conclusion that this is where the thief gets in."

"Bars? Are you serious? Those are not bars."

Actually Jose was not attaching bars to his window at all, but long pieces of wood. When he finished hammering them across the window he checked the door and counted his money:

"Hmm. Let me see now." He moistened his thumb and started counting his money. "Six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven." He smiled. It had been a profitable day. He had eleven pesos and fourteen centavos. "Zoraida will soon be mine," he thought contentedly, and placed the money in his wallet and the wallet in the hip pocket of his pants. Then he folded the trousers carefully and placed them on a chair.

He was chuckling softly as he climbed into bed. It had occurred to him that his beloved, corpulent as she was, would cost him four pesos and eighteen centavos per pound. Zoraida was expensive fruit indeed.

Yawning once or twice Jose rolled over on his side and soon was sound asleep. Then, when he woke up:

"Cinco, ses, siete, siete . . ." Jose stared dumbly at the money on the bed. His mouth was hanging open. Was it possible? Suddenly his desperate fingers were counting the money again. When he finished he flung the money to the floor. He had been robbed again. "Dios mio!" he cried in anguish. "Am I being victimized by a ghost?" Quickly he raced to check the door and window and found them both intact. They had not been disturbed in any way. Fear gripped his heart. If no human thing had entered his room and money had been stolen the culprit had to be a ghost. Perhaps an evil spirit. Santa Barbara be praised!

Jose never knew how he made his rounds that day, selling platanos maduros, boniato, papas, mangos, and pretty frutas. As he pushed his cart through the streets he seemed in a daze. When amigos said buenos dias to him he did not smile or return any greeting at all. When he gathered the courage to face Zoraida:

"Lies! Nothing but lies!"

"But I swear to you, Zoraida. I placed . . ."

"Shut up! Idiot! Imbecile! Don't you dare swear anything in my house! So now it's ghosts, is it? Alcoholic spirits, you mean. Well, let me tell you something you, you mummy. We are finished, do you hear? Finished."

"But Zoraida . . ."

"Leave my house at once! I never want to see you again!"

Jose's head was bowed with grief as he walked the streets that night. His heart was heavy and he was crying within himself because his unhappiness was so great. He walked into a bar:

"Oye, bartender. Bring me a beer."

"Hatuey, Polar, or Crystal?" the cantinero asked him.

Jose snorted. "On second thought forget the beer," he said. "I have suffered a great tragedy this day and I have need to paralyze my grief and sorrow. Be good enough to bring me a triple cognac."

Jose left the canteena at twelve o'clock and of course he was shamefully drunk. He was so drunk, in fact, that he could not properly maneuver his feet. Staggering in every direction he crashed into several garbage cans before he managed to reach his room. There, force of habit compelled him to count his money, secure the door, and check the window. Satisfied that everything was in order he climbed into bed. But he could not sleep. There was a dizziness in his head and his vision was playing tricks on him. Objects in the room appeared out

of focus and every so often the bed seemed to rise from the floor and float in the air. "Aye," he moaned. "This is terrible. I swear on the bones of my grandmother that I will never drink cognac again." Rolling on his side Jose closed his eyes and then, abruptly, he stiffened under the covers when he heard a sound. "What was that? Did I hear something?" The oddest sensation swept over him. Was someone in the room? Maybe it was the ghost. Fearfully, his eyes peered over the hem of the covers and searched the room. Though it was quite dark he could see clearly, and what he saw was a ghost.

Cowering and trembling under the covers Jose could not believe his eyes. His pants were floating in the air and yet no human hand was touching them. They were climbing higher and higher and moving toward the transom over the doorway. Unable to restrain his panic any longer Jose screamed. "Help! Policia! Help!"

Following in the wake of his screams Jose heard a startled cry and a crashing sound and saw his pants fall in a crumpled heap on the floor. In the same instant he was aware of the sound of running feet.

Momentarily confused, Jose soon understood everything in a flash. He had been tricked. Oh, how could he have been so stupid. Leaping out of bed he tore open the door and saw a man fleeing through the hall.

"Stop! You there, stop!"

Chasing after the thief without bothering to put on his pants Jose caught him just as the latter reached the street. Grabbing him by the shoulder he spun the fellow about and was surprised when he saw it was Rolando, a tenant in the house. A lengthy rod and reel was clutched in his hand and he had a startled look on his face.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Senor Rolando?"

"I . . . I am going fishing, Senor Sosa."

"At two thirty in the morning?"

Rolando lowered his eyes and fidgeted nervously on his feet. "I . . . I always go fishing at this time of morning."

"Yes, but not in the river," Jose said. "When you fish you fish for the money in people's pockets." He shoved Rolando. "Move along, thief. You and I are going to take a walk to the local precinct."

Alarm clouded Rolando's face. "Precinct? But why, Senor Sosa? I have committed no crime. What have I done?"

"That fishing pole," Jose said. "You have been using it to rob me blind the past two weeks. I'm wise to your dirty little trick." Jose glared his eyes and shoved Rolando again. "Allright, move along. Be quick about it, too."

Suddenly, and without warning, Rolando hit Jose across the face with the fishing pole and started to run. Knocked to the ground Jose's glaring eyes darted about and saw

a piece of iron tubing lying near the curb. Snatching it up he jumped to his feet and went after Rolando. He finally caught him several blocks away. "You filthy swine!" Jose swore, and hit Rolando over the head with the iron pipe.

When a policia arrived he immediately summoned an ambulance to carry Rolando away because he had a fractured skull and he summoned a squad car to take Jose away because he had committed a terrible crime. At the precinct he was charged with disorderly conduct, indecent exposure, and felonious assault with intent to kill. Then he was booked and fingerprinted and locked in a cell.

During the trial that followed it was disclosed that Rolando was the nocturnal prowler who had been pilfering Jose's wallet. Using a tall ladder he would poke his fishing rod through the transom over the door and pick up Jose's pants with the hook and relieve them of a small portion of the money they contained. Granted a lesser plea Jose finally pleaded guilty and was sentenced to six months in Habana's Principe Prison. It was here that he received the letter from Zoraida in which she expressed her reluctance to marry a common criminal. When Jose read the news he fell to his knees, clasped his hands in an attitude of prayer, and whispered gratefully, "Santa Barbara be praised . . . . Santa Barbara be praised!"

Whiz Cop

Nothing beats the reunion of a couple of boyhood friends.

BY JIM ROBINSON

BARNEY, old boy! Haven't seen you in a dozen years. How are yuh?"

The short, stocky man on the subway platform grinned widely and pumped my arm.

"Wait a minute," I said. "Don't tell me . . . Rafferty! Dan Rafferty. It's good t'see yuh, fella." I never did cotton to Rafferty very much, but there he was, big as life, my old classmate in Public School Nineteen.

I'd been watching him out of the corner of my eyes for some minutes and if he wasn't a whiz cop, I'd miss my guess. Now that he had recognized me, I suppose he would start rubbing it in about me goin' upstate to a small town to earn a living, instead of stickin' to Big Town. What he don't know, don't hurt 'im.

"Whatcha doin' fer a livin' out in th' sticks," he says to me, just as an express roars in.

I stepped up close so's he could hear an' hollered into his big ear. "Tell yuh when we get inside th' train . . ."

He nodded sagely an' his eyes drifted to th' few passengers gettin' off onto th' platform. I could see he was a guy on th' lookout for a wanted character . . . always hustlin' for an arrest.

Rafferty gets my elbow an' shoves me ahead of him, nodding his sandy-thatched head toward the open door. I stepped into th' vestibule an' looked up th' aisle. There were two empty seats together about ten feet away. I made for 'em fast but two dames comin' from th' center door beats me to it. They siddown an' smirk at each other an' hunch up closer together, pleased as Punch.

I got a kick outta them. Rafferty comes up an' we hang onto a coupla straps.

One of the women I noticed,

nudged th' other with an elbow, an' then looked at Rafferty's waistline. After a bit I managed to get in a glance, too.

Rafferty is a short slob an' when he reaches for a strap over his head, his coat yawns open like a tent fly on each side. His belt slides down around the lowest curve along his paunch an' somehow manages to hang up there but gives an impression of gettin' ready to move on, slowly but surely.

What the ladies were observin' with some curiosity was Rafferty's very large and ornate watch fob. A gift of gratefulness by th' high school principal that Rafferty had finally gotten together enough passing marks all at one time, to rate a diploma. My suits don't have no watch pockets so I figured Rafferty had one sewed in special. He would, y'know.

But I wondered if Rafferty really had a good timepiece on th' end of that fob or maybe just a dollar turnip or maybe even a chunk of lead to keep th' thing lookin' good out front below his watch pocket.

Rafferty swings on his strap as we round a curve above 96th Street and forgets he has asked me a question. He starts to yaak good about his job on the Force.

"I'm hustlin' th' grifts now, Barney . . . an' keepin' an eye on th' jug men in th' West Thirties." Rafferty pushed back his straw at a rakish angle, tried to sound mysterious. "Seen a guy th' other day make a touch in th' Pennsy Station wit' a stiff in a blanket an' when I cornered th' weasel he hadda wallet thick wit' tens an' twenties. Know what a 'whiz cop' does, Barney? I'm a 'whiz cop'."

"Yeah. I know, Rafferty. A plain clothes guy detailed to th' pickpocket squad. Grifts are pickpockets and a stiff in a blanket is a newspaper that th' 'hook' shields his mitt from sight with when he grabs th' guy's dough."

"Hey! You're all right fer a hick, Barney. Read it in a book somers, eh? Well, lemme tell yuh th' rest of it." Rafferty again loosens th' death grip his straw has on his forehead an' lays it back on his head so far it makes you nervous it'll fall off sure. You can hardly pay attention to what he's sayin'. "This guy has a good 'tip,' see," he said. "A good crowd. There's a lot of 'em millin' around after bags an' porters are jammin' around' between th' passengers. This guy has no 'stall' wit'im. He's workin' strictly alone, see. Still, he don't make good use of his 'tie', that'd his coat . . . that's danglin' from one arm. Instead he uses th' 'stiff'.

"Well," Rafferty gives me a slow smile, "I nab th' guy but before I can cuff 'im he whirls around an' makes a break . . . droppin' th' wallet. That's how come I know it's full of tens an' twenties. The guy who'd just lost it, opens it up when I give it back an' he slips me a twenty fer a reward."

"And the grifter gets away, eh, Rafferty?" I says.

"Well, sure. He can make me some more reward money tomorra or mebbe th' next day, see?"

"But yuh know where to get'im, eh, Rafferty . . . I mean anytime yuh want to pick'im up?"

"Yeah, sure, Barney boy. I can always pick th' guy up. He usually works with a dame. I can find her anytime, too."

"Yuh don't say. You're smooth, Rafferty."

"Yeah, that ain't all. Sometimes I get a 'roper' to work wit me. A dame, if I gets me choice. She gets chummy wit th' various 'hooks' in her own little way, see, an' puts me wise to many of 'em. There mus' be half a hundred 'Grifts' workin' th' Pennsy Station every twenty-four hours! I'll betcha yuh ain't even got a station where you come from! ha! Ha!"

"Contrary-wise, Rafferty. We got a nice little station upstate."

"What do they keep their money in, their socks?" Rafferty was gettin' around to his old-time remarks so I just overlooked th' slight and said, "Boy, this train really speeds along, eh Rafferty. Some subway. That was 50th Street station we just passed!"

"Yeah," Rafferty's tone was keyed as though he owned stock in the transit company. "It does all right. Say, I'm gettin' out at Times Square. How about a short beer an' a long chat about old times before yuh go back an' hole up fer th' winter. Ha! Nearly forgot to ask you about what your line is, Barney boy. I get all wound up when I see an old chum . . ."

"Many thanks, Rafferty, but I gotta 'pointment downtown," I says. "Can't break it up now. What do I do fer a livin' . . . oh, my Gosh!" The two women were getting up from their seats in front of Rafferty an' me. One of 'em had nearly put out my eye with her umbrella handle. These dames; they never look where their bundles are goin' or their umbrella handles.

Just then the engineer applies his air brakes and th' train slows swiftly. We hit some switches comin' into the station an' I was forced to hang onto th' strap hard or lose my footing an' be thrown to th' floor. I was swept against Rafferty an' nearly pushed him over. I threw out my free arm an' hung onto 'im, tryin' to smile.

"You hicks never can keep your feet in a subway, Barney old boy. Well, sorry yuh can't talk awhile over a beer. Glad t've seen yuh again, Barney. You can always look me up through headquarters, y'know." He gave a short wave, "Don't take any wooden nickels."

Rafferty was out th' doorway now onto th' subway platform. He was still talking as he faced about toward me. The door started to shut again, so I stuck out one hand an' stopped it. My other hand I extended toward Rafferty.

"Here's your watch fob, Rafferty," I shouted above th' din of an approachin' train. "I'm a 'grifter', Rafferty . . . a real pro."

I withdrew my hand from the door. It pushed shut with a solid click. The train surged ahead.

Rafferty's face, as he stood there on the platform, was th' color of Campbell's ketchup. He just stood there like he had rooted, starin' down at his ornate watch fob . . . with th' chunk of lead on the end of it.

She was such a desirable woman and she had so many troubles and he was so eager to help . . . something just had to be wrong.

sucker play

BY

WILFRED C. VROMAN

IT WAS a hot, dry, dusty day when Jim Holliday saw her.

She was wearing a bright-red skirt that was short of her knees by several inches and a yellow silk blouse straining tautly over large, pointed breasts. Her high-heeled beige slippers clicked smartly on the sidewalk bordering the town square and it was only after careful observation of the rounded symmetry of her calves and knees and thighs from the vantage point of a bench on the city hall lawn that he glanced at her face, shaded from the direct Arizona sun by a wide-brimmed straw hat.

He sat gaping at the perfection of her features: the fine-arched natural line of her eyebrows, softly rounded chin, slender neck, dark eyes and small straight nose. The only thing marring the absolute beauty of her face was the pouting, full lower lip. Spoiled, did he say? Hell, her lips were the most kissable he'd ever seen!

Not until he had completed the most precise measuring of these very vital statistics did Jim notice that there was a small boy in a wrinkled black suit and a finger-smudged white cowboy hat trotting alongside of her mincing gait and he sadly admitted that she undoubtedly looked too good to be unattached.

Just as he had given up and was willing to be contented with a swing-

ing view from the rear, she turned and headed right for him, stepping across the sun-scorched grass with the thumb-sucking boy in tow.

The shock of that ripe roundness approaching him made Jim leap to his feet as if a rattler were under his bench. He yanked off his high-crowned hat and awkwardly stood there: six feet of bleached khaki, his grease-stained, work-reddened hands trembling slightly. He could feel the blood mounting hotly into his face, crimsoning the sharp, jutting chin, high cheekbones and hawk-hooked nose. He knew his eyes must look like faded blue denim against a desert sunrise and so he said nothing but watched the swaying of her full hips as she neared.

"Mister, could y'all help me?"

"Help you, miss—ma'am?"

Her dark eyes widened appealingly and her voice was as sweet as molasses. "I'm looking for the police. Could y'all tell me where I could find the sheriff?"

"Are you in trouble, ma'am? Who's botherin' you?"

"It's not that so much. My young-one is hungry and I have no money."

"Oh?"

"If you're thinking about my old man, he's left us: Lafe-boy and me. The good-for-nothing didn't say a word. Just didn't come back this morning and we waited for him all day. When I went to the rodeo, the man there said Big-John didn't show up at all last night. Said he went off with some woman,"

Jim Holliday studied her intently, watching the ripe, red mouth and widely-expressive eyes as she talked. He couldn't place the accent: it wasn't native Arizonan. Probably western Oklahoma, he concluded. "Maybe he's hurt, ma'am."

"No, he didn't ride at all yesterday. I checked with the rodeo-boss. He said they were drinking and carrying on something fierce all day. No, I reckon he's just gone."

"He'll be back. Don't worry none, ma'am."

"He'd better not come back." Her dark eyes widened with bright anger. "This is the last time he's going to fret me."

Jim stared at her. "You mean he's done it before? To a girl as pretty as you!"

"Yes, thank you kindly. I don't rightly care for myself but the little fellow here don't know about these things."

She looked at the boy twisting around her full thigh with his fat little hands and her soft mouth trembled slightly. She pulled him against her rounded hip and patted his prodding shoulder. "Poor little tyke. He's been so good all day, but he just keeps asking where his daddy is."

Lafe looked up at her with sad dark eyes and suddenly howled painfully. "I want my daddy. Where's Big-John? I want to go home, Mommy. I'm hungry—"

"Hush, Lafe-boy." She leaned over the boy and Jim got a heady

glance deep into her open-necked blouse.

"—and I've got to go to the bathroom and I'm thirsty too."

Jim's adam's apple bobbed hugely as he swallowed to moisten his patched throat. "I'd be obliged if you'd let me help you, ma'am. It ain't right for the little chap to be hungry. Let me have the pleasure of buying him a meal—both of you, I mean."

The gratitude in her eyes was almost more than he could bear and he quickly boosted the boy onto his angular shoulder. "I'm goin' to whether you say yes or not."

They walked across the wide, deserted street to Norma's Cafe. Jim couldn't say why he went there. Maybe it was automatic—from the habit of years. He told himself it was because Placertown didn't really have any stylish eating houses, but he couln't help noticing Norma's lip-biting frown when they came in, him holding Lafe's small hand while the woman selected a table near the wall.

Jim's thin chest swelled proudly and he was extra polite. He pulled out a chair for the girl and waited for her to take her hat off and watched her fluff out her short-cut blond curly hair before he sat down.

Norma's impatience during their grave consultation of what was good for Lafe-boy to eat amused him and he deliberately sent her back to the kitchen for a higher chair for the boy. Her dragging reluctance suited him because it gave him a better chance to look at the girl. She was even more beautiful with her hat off, and seemed younger too. He judged her to be not over twenty-two or three.

She smiled embarrassedly at him. "Well, here we are."

"Yes, ma'am," said Jim.

"Please don't call me that," she asked. "You've been so nice and I'm sure we're going to be good friends. Why don't you call me Joy? My name's Joy Jordan."

Jim allowed as how he was glad to meet her and settled back to better enjoy the moment. It wasn't every day that a man fed a hungry boy and earned a handsome woman's appreciation. It did his heart good to be a benefactor to such a deserving pair and not to have hardly a selfish motive in doing it.

The little guy really lit into the food and Jim could tell that the young woman hadn't eaten in a long time by the way she ate so slow and delicate-like. He could scarcely keep from having a feeling of ownership and sat beaming at them and he glanced around frequently to see if Norma was still watching them. He imagined folks would think he was the husband and father and he wished he'd picked a better place.

Finally Joy pushed her plate away with a sigh of satisfaction and Jim hastily made up his mind. He swiped at Lafe-boy's ice cream smeared face with a paper napkin

and scooped the boy from his chair and hoisted him on his shoulder.

"Joy, we got to find a place for the tad to rest. He's plumb tuckered out. Now, you've got to let me put you up for a while. I know just the place. There's a real nice hotel here in town that'll be just right for you two."

"Jim, I can't let you do it."

"I don't care whether you can or not—I'm going to do it."

"It's just not right, Jim."

"Joy, it's only till your—till your husband comes back."

"I can't do it, Jim."

"I understand. There's no strings attached."

"Jim, you're wonderful."

Her beautiful eyes were dimmed with tears and Jim felt tender and proud and he looked briefly at Norma's tight-lipped stare and he carelessly tossed a half-dollar in plain view in the middle of the table. "It's settled then."

His arm trembled slightly where she put her hand on it and they walked down the quiet street to the three-storied brick Placertown House with the sleepy-eyed boy on his shoulder.

She stopped once and pulled Jim's head near her soft-scented hair and whispered electrifying in his generous ear. "Jim, we'd better register as man and wife or they might think something's wrong—us with no luggage and all."

The shock carried him through the desk clerk's questioning stare and past the bellhop's knowing grin into the large room with the embarrassingly-intimate double bed smack in the center.

Jim was careful not to overtip the boy, finally deciding a dime was too small. He handed him a quarter and avoided the leering eyes of the too-old youth.

He was glad when the door closed out the annoying smirk and he awkwardly lowered Lafe onto the faded blue bedspread and pulled off the boy's leather-chased boots and placed them by the front legs of the old brass bedstead.

He was studiously casual, walking across the thin, worn red rug to the long window overlooking the street and evenly drawing the frayed windowshade all the way to the sill.

The dimmed room was hazy and warm and Jim's breath was labored when he turned and looked at her.

She was still standing near the door, her hat in her hand, and her glance was cool and level. His gaze wavered and he was now quite uncertain. He felt heavy and clumsy and stupid and he had a sudden lurching knowledge that he was a fool to think that a girl as young and beautiful as Joy would give an old reprobate like him a second look and he started past her for the door.

She moved toward him then, dropping her hat, and she held a soft hand against his cheek. "Dear Jim," she said.

He swept her crushingly against him and mashed his lips on the full,

inviting mouth. She moaned and pulled against him and moved her shoulders against his chest and her arms pressed warmly on his back.

His hand smoothed the silk of her upper arm, then slid caressingly over her throbbing throat and glided softly across the yielding firmness of her young, full breast. His fingers swept back over the swelling softness and fumbled for the straining buttons on her blouse.

She tore her mouth from his and turned her head from his searching lips. "Not now. Not while the boy's awake. Come back later when he's asleep."

Jim wrackingly put a halter on his reckless impatience. He knew if he tried to move in too fast he could ruin his chance. His voice was a dry croak, "How soon should I come back?"

Her mouth trembled slightly and her eyes were brilliant and moist. "Come back in about an hour. He'll be asleep and I can freshen up a bit." She hesitated and long lashes hid her eyes. "Jim—could you?—I didn't bring a thing with me. I mean, I left all my clothes and makeup and everything when I left this morning. I'd like to change into something nicer for you."

"Of course! I should've thought." Jim's face was as red as a new saddle. He quickly thrust a crumpled wad of bills into her hand and wrapped her soft fingers around them. "I'm six kinds of a fool, Joy. But bear with me, I'll do better. You'll see."

He didn't trust himself to touch that beautiful mouth and hastily pressed his lips against her hand. "You just take your sweet time and I'll be back after you've done a little shopping for yourself."

Her lovely eyes were as soft as a lover's promise and he kept the memory of her warm fragrance with him through the midafternoon heat of the empty street.

Holliday grinned at his sand-colored, water-slicked hair and his shave-glistened face reflected in the time-blackened mirror at the end of the long hallway. The rope-like fabric of the green runner stretched under his eager feet and he felt as foolish and as proud as a young bridegroom. His knuckles on the door were firm but discreet and he felt the air rasping hotly in his throat.

She was breathtaking in flowing foamy pink and Jim figured his money had never been so well distributed. A stunning paralysis gripped him, tightening his chest and his knees sagged shortly.

She quickly stepped toward him and grasped his hand, pulling him into the room. She slammed the door and leaned her back against it and her eyes were wide with terror. She drew a long, sobbing breath, causing the short filmy jacket to loosen at her throat and her full breasts to thrust against the sheer, lacy net of the gown underneath.

"Jim! He's been here!"

"Who? Holliday's mouth was slack.

"My husband—Big-John. You'd better leave before he comes back. He's out looking for you."

"For me? Why?"

"He's going to kill you. Oh, Jim, I'm so afraid he'll hurt you too."She abruptly buried her small blond head against his shoulder and gripped his arm with both hands.

Jim gently wrapped his free arm around her trembling shoulders and momentarily rocked her in a soothing cradle. He lifted her chin with his hand, raising her tear-stained face to his. He kissed her moist mouth lightly and briefly. "Now, don't you be scared, little lady. No one's going to harm you."

Her luminous eyes were glassy with fear. "You don't understand. It's you he's after now. He's got a gun, Jim."

"Well he's not the first man I've seen with a gun."

"But *he* knows how to use it. And don't you think he won't!"

"I reckon I'm not worried none."

"You ought to be. Look at what he did to me."

Joy pulled away from him and impatiently tugged open the tie cord at her throat. She wrenched off the bed jacket into a floating heap on the floor and slid the narrow gown strap over her satiny shoulder, the light material of her gown slipping past the gleaming white mound of her breast. "See." And she stepped back into his still out-stretched arms and grasping his wrist, placed his hand on the blueblack mark on her upper arm.

Before Holliday's numbed senses could react to the bare flesh under his fingers, a stupefying, blinding flash of light exploded in his eyes. He stumbled back from a smashing impact on his jaw, crashing against the wall and he felt his knees jar on the floor.

Jim pushed up with his hands and shook his head, trying to clear the ringing in his ears. The scuffed toes of two very large boots clumped into his blurred view of the rug and he decided to stay on all fours for a while.

The voice above him was a heavy rumble. "What are you doing with my wife, joker?'

Holliday looked over the steaming cup of coffee at Norma and shrugged. "What can you say when you're caught like that? I tried to explain to the big clown that I didn't do anything to his wife. But he wouldn't have any part of it. He stomped around and said he was going to cave in my head."

"Too bad he didn't," said Norma bitterly.

"Any way he claimed he was going to take it out of my hide and for a couple of minutes I was afraid he might try."

"Some day you're going to get it good, Jim."

"I stayed on my hands and knees all the time. Finally he decided

that it was only right that I make it up to him some way. Well, you know, it's surprising how much he knew about me. Seems he heard about me owning the gas station and all about me buying a ranch and he even knew how much I had in the savings account in the bank."

"It doesn't surprise me a bit. A man's a darn fool when he's trying to impress a pretty woman and you always did talk too much, Jim."

"He told me then that he was going to be big-hearted and sell me a very valuable photograph. When I said I wanted the negative too he said that would cost a little more."

"He had you good, didn't he?"

"Believe me, he knew it too. I guess he figured to make a quick killing and get the legal papers to my place signed before I could think. Anyway, he made Joy get dressed right there in front of me."

"I'll bet you enjoyed that, you hound."

"I was a little nervous. He marched us off to the real estate office—Paul Hawthorne's a notary, you know—and had a bill of sale made up. For a dollar and other considerations, he had Paul write."

"Some deal," said Norma.

"I reckoned things had gone about far enough when he signed the papers and I hauled out my badge."

"What about his gun?"

"Turned out he didn't have any. His size is enough to scare the daylights out of any mortal. He got real mad when he found out I was the law and he wanted to boot the poor little gal for not knowing I was the police chief here."

"Part time," snapped Norma.

"Filling station doesn't take up much time now that the state highway bypasses the town, Norma. Well, that was about all there was to it. We locked him and the girl in the jailhouse and it's a shame the way he'd treated that little thing—her whole body was a mass of bruises from where he'd beat her."

Jim looked at Norma's white-knuckled hands tapping on the serving counter and grinned. "Leastwise, that's what the matron says."

"Where was the boy all this time?"

"We found him at the rodeo grounds. He thought he was only playing a game."

"You too. A darn fool's game."

"A fool is often parted from his money. And every day is a Holliday for me."

Norma groaned and took away his empty cup.

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LUST OR HONOR

He wanted to hurt her . . . it was an obsession. But instead he loved her.

A MANHUNT CLASSIC

BY WILLIAM VANCE

I PARKED the department car, a plain black sedan, across the street from the Apoco Court, a pink stucco motel, old enough to have a few struggling vines creeping upward toward the exposed beams of the rafters. Southwestern wind and sun had turned the lawn into a sickly greenish-brown. I turned the ignition off and got a cigarette and started to push in the lighter. I remembered the battery was low and found a book of matches wedged down behind the seat, fished it out between two fingers, watching the court all the time.

The cigarette tasted as flat as the rest of them had for the past twelve hours and I threw it away and looked at my watch. It was 6:10 A.M. The pinch was set for 6:15. Five minutes to go. I'd found her in bed with a man a million years ago and I suddenly wondered how it would be, finding her like that again. My palms were damp. Deep down in my guts there was a familiar pain.

Steve Ortega passed me in his personal car and wheeled around the corner to the west side of the court. He parked across the street and I watched him get out of his car and disappear from my sight, behind the gray concrete wall that was part of the court, a middle to low class motel. Just the kind a hot lampster would pick for a night's lodging. A night's lodging with a beautiful dame. A beautiful dame with a tall, sensational body. I crowded a lot of thoughts out of my mind.

A dry-cleaning panel passed me and wheeled into the court and stopped in front of number six. Ole Anderson had loaned me the truck after I'd promised to have any damage repaired. Not that I thought there'd be any trouble, but in this business you can never tell. Ole always expected the worst. A smart guy, I thought, a really smart guy.

Ramon Cadenza remained in the driver's seat of the panel. I couldn't see the two men inside the truck but I knew they were there. I'd watched them climb in ten minutes before, in back of City Hall, just a little while after the briefing session in my office.

I patted the Magnum under my arm and put my hand on the door latch. I froze there. An elderly man came out of number five and put two suitcases on the cement walk while I cursed softly under my breath. The elderly man turned and stood with his arms akimbo, as a fat woman waddled down and motioned upward. The elderly man looked at the sky and I could see his lips move. I cursed again, thinking how a small thing like this could foul up my plans. The man was saying the sky was beautiful just like all the tourists before him and those who followed would say. Only now, he was trading his life for a look at a morning sun and mountain and sky paint job.

I pushed the door open, thinking I'd go over and take a chance and hurry the couple on. I stopped when he bent and lifted the two suitcases and went toward the carport beside number five. The woman opened the trunk and the man placed the two suitcases inside and slammed the lid shut. The woman looked bulky in the brilliantly colored squaw skirt. The two of them disappeared from my view and a moment later I sighed with relief as the car backed and then headed for the street. The car was a green Plymouth and carried a Maryland license plate.

The couple looked straight ahead. The car turned west on Highway 66.

2.

The sun edged over the stark black outline of the Sandias as I got out of the car and went across the street. My legs felt sort of stiff like they always do when I'm walking into something. Stiffer than usual, though, because she was in there. I came up behind the cleaning truck. Ramon got out and stood there holding a man's suit over one arm. I saw a little bead of sweat on his brown forehead and his tiny black mustache quivered just enough to notice. The suit draped over his arm concealed the .38 in his hand. He gave me a taut, uncertain grin and started toward number six.

I was out of sight behind the truck. "Steve's got the back covered," I said. "Everything's all right, Ray."

Everything, that is, except Mark Nadine, Chief of Detectives. Nadine, the big city cop who'd gone native. Ramon nodded and stepped away, toward number six, moving fast now. And I waited, remembering. The fancy-stitched boots I wore helped me to remember. And the big hat. A native ring and the pounded silver watchband. I'd given it everything I had, hoping to wash off all that had accumulated on me in ten years of working on a big city police force. Where the fix was in. And a funny thing about that—it wasn't the fix that ran me out, but the girl with the beautiful legs. And if I wasn't mistaken she was behind that number six on the motel door.

Ramon was at the door, rapping. The noise was loud in the quiet of the morning. The plan was a good one. Ramon was supposed to act surprised when the door opened. He was supposed to step back, look up at the number, apologize and turn away. When the door closed, but before the man inside had a chance to lock it, I'd bust in and take them both. That initial call at the door would leave him relieved, and relaxed. He might not even have his gun in his hand.

I hoped he wouldn't have; Edgar Ball, an innocent-sounding name, for a killer. That's what the newspapers said, at any rate. They didn't have the girl's name right, but it was her picture. There wasn't anyone else in the world who looked like her. When she was born, God had broken the mold.

Ramon was knocking again and with the sound came the thought that maybe they wouldn't be there. It was almost a wish and it shook me for a moment. Then I blamed it on the chill morning, even as I felt the warmth of the sun now up over the mountain rim. Feeling the warmth in the bright rays, it seemed that things were accentuated all out of proportion, the warm sun on my neck, the rustle of the silvery-leafed cottonwoods and the thickening traffic stream on West Central, which is also Highway 66.

I had a feeling something was wrong. I wished I'd had the court

cleared of everyone except the occupants of number six. But that activity might have tipped our hand. I walked over behind Ramon and he stepped aside with an audible sigh of relief and I tried the door. It was locked.

"Get the manager," I told Ramon and he walked toward the office at the front, still carrying the suit over his arm, while I pressed my ear against the door. I could hear nothing except the sounds around me.

In a moment, Ramon came back, followed by the manager. I took the keys from the man and fitted the key to the lock and gave it a twist and swung the door open, giving it a hard push.

It was a fool thing to do but I stepped quickly inside, flattening myself against the wall. The single room was empty. The bed clothing was rumpled. Two pillows were indented, indicating a couple had slept there. Cigarette butts overflowed the ash tray on the bedside stand. I moved around the room, swearing mentally. They were gone and they couldn't be, because we'd had them under surveillance almost since their arrival, the previous afternoon.

Ramon said, "What do you think, chief?" He threw the suit on a chiar.

"I'm afraid to think," I said.

And I was. It was impossible and yet they were not there. The manager put his head in the door. "Not here?" he asked nervously, and stepped inside, his voice stronger, his manner perceptibly changed. "What do you want them for, chief?"

"Remember the Leafield kid?"

"Oh, no," he said. His adam's apple worked. He nodded, remembrance in the shine of his eyes.

"Them," I said. I suddenly remembered the car with the Maryland license plates. The elderly couple. It'd left, that green car had, just before we moved in. A sudden sweat broke out on me. I said, "Next door. Number five. Let's take a look."

Ramon went out first, the manager followed and I after him. I still had the keys. The manager rattled the door. "Bet they took the key with them," he said accusingly.

I pushed him aside and opened number five. I didn't have to go in. They were both in bed, just as they'd slept. A middle-aged couple, the man with salt and pepper hair, a lined, careworn face, the woman a motherly, white-haired type.

"Get out an alarm," I told Ramon. "To the State police. Green Plymouth with a Maryland license plate. Westbound. They can't get far. Also, have the office advise Kansas City and the local FBI. I'm going on."

Ramon, unloosening the tied couple, called, "Take the uniformed men." I didn't answer. I was sprinting across the street, dodging traffic, to the car, feeling relieved and

not wanting Ramon to see that relief.

3.

I kept my eyes open along Central West, watching for the green Plymouth in service stations and in front of restaurants. They might not be hungry, but assault doesn't bother some people. Or murder. Like the Leafield kid. They'd made the boy's old man for half a million. In unmarked small bills. First break on the case had dropped in my lap. The manager of the Apoco called me and told me there was a strange-acting couple in his court. Quarrelling, he'd said. He didn't know anything for sure, except the guy had a gun, a blue-steel pistol, a .38 or something like that. And the girl with him was just as tough as the guy, even if she was stacked and pretty. I'd already seen the newspaper pictures and just on a hunch I showed him the picture I still carried in my wallet without ever looking at it.

He'd said, "That's her, all right."

And the dread I'd felt ever since the newspaper picture appeared was confirmed.

The manager's identification had been enough. We staked out the place, notified the FBI and passed on the information. We were requested to make the pinch and I'd deliberately not notified the local FBI. Don't ask me why because I didn't know myself.

And now, I was cruising along West Central, looking for a green Plymouth with a Maryland license plate and hoping I wouldn't find it.

I jammed my foot on the brake. The car was parked between a motel and a service station and it was empty. No need to wonder what had happened. Taking no chances, they'd switched cars at the first opportunity. I cursed as I got on the radio and reported, asking the dispatcher to inform highway patrol to stop any car with a man and woman in it. I laid the microphone on the seat and got out of the car and walked over to the Plymouth. Nothing in it, nothing at all. I hadn't expected anything. I walked on over to the motel manager's office, rang the buzzer and waited, sweating. It took a half a dozen rings to bring a blinking-eyed man in pajamas.

"No vacancies," he snapped and then came wide-awake when I told him who I was and showed him my badge. "Up late last night," he apologized. "Figured to sleep late this morning."

"Make it tomorrow," I said. "I think one of your guests is missing a car."

He went with me. We checked only those units that didn't hold a car and most of the tourists had pulled out early, it seemed. We found the owner in the seventh unit. He was a drug salesman and after calming down he gave me the make and license number of his

car. I went back to the department car and called the dispatcher and gave him the information and drove on up the long grade with the city dwindling behind me.

The highway stretched ahead, into the sky. Lots of traffic. Passing roadhouses, service stations, motels and a foreign car lot. They specialized in many makes of cars and what made me slow, I don't know. But that's where I found the drug salesman's car. And this time there was someone in it. A man. The man I'd seen drive out of the Apoco this morning. Her powder on his hair, to make him look older. He had a neat bullet hole in his right temple. He was lying on his side on the seat and there was blood on the bright seat covers and it had run down over the edge of the seat to the floor, where it stood in a sticky, dark puddle.

The woman was alone now. Alone, somewhere out on the highway. With a car that could do 170 if anyone could be found who'd keep the accelerator down long enough. Because a Ferrari was missing from the lot. Why, I wondered, did she take a car that could be identified as far off as it could be seen?

I called the dispatcher again and gave him the dope and drove westward. Not with any hope of catching up. A police special just doesn't overtake a Ferrari. But with the thought I might head her off if the state police turned her back with their roadblock at Cubero, just fifty or so miles west. That was a favorite spot of theirs for a roadblock. I figured that's where they'd put it up. I didn't get anything on the radio except routine business because the highway patrol is on a different frequency. But now and then the dispatcher gave me a call. Until I got over the mountain and then the calls faded. Nothing but static. I turned down the static and drove on as fast as the special would travel.

Ever get a sudden flash and everything falls into place? It happened like that with me, when I passed this road that turned off to the left. Just a plain gravel road, no markers, no nothing. Not on a lot of road maps. Maybe one person in a thousand knew it led to a pueblo, a cluster of mud and rock that held a half a hundred pueblo Indians who didn't particularly care to have tourists prowling around their homes. The road dims and brightens after the pueblo and wanders through the mountain and over the desert, across the International Boundary and into Mexico. Maybe one person in a thousand would know that and maybe someone on the lam and feeling the law breathing down their neck would turn off on a side road. Anyway, the reason for the Ferrari was plain. She didn't intend to be driving where people would recognize the car. And we, the two of us, had travelled that road on our honeymoon a couple of lifetimes ago.

Five miles off the highway, I rolled up in front of the first adobe and by that time I'd figured that she'd dropped him when he didn't want to go along with her plans. Or because she wanted all that half-million for herself. That part didn't make too much difference with me. I got out of the car and stretched as a tall, brown man wearing skintight levis and a green and red-checked shirt came out. He had enough silver on both wrists to start a jewelry store and it jangled as he walked toward the car.

"A foreign car," he said as he came up to the car. "Went through here like a bat out of hell."

Some of these Indians are really bright. "How long ago?"

"Maybe twenty minutes or so," he said. "Ran over one of my chickens."

I got back in the car. "I'll pay for it," I said, "on my way back."

"Watch the washouts," he called as I drove away.

4.

She'd hit the first washout travelling at a good clip. I saw the skid marks where the Ferrari had left the road. There was even a smell of dust in the air that irritated my sinus. She'd got the car back on the road, though, and after that she must have gone over the washouts pretty easy. No more skid marks.

I kept trying my radio but couldn't raise anyone. And no wonder, with all the ridges and mountains in between. I kept trying, though, and I started sweating as the gasoline gauge kept nudging me in the belly.

She ran out of gas before I did. I rounded a climbing turn and found the Ferrari sitting in the middle of the road. I jammed on the brakes and slid out on the driver's side, keeping low, protected by the car. On my side, the mountain fell away, almost sheer and a quick look over the edge told me she couldn't have gone there. Above me rose the rocky, rugged terrain of a red and yellow mountain, pitted with boulders ranging in size from a baseball to a house. There was crumbling gray shale and decaying ledges and a few windblown struggling cedars. Not a thing moved. Not a pebble rattled.

Tensing, I ran for the Ferrari and I had the Magnum in my hand now, gripping it tightly. I didn't know what I'd do, but that dead man made a vivid picture in my mind. I reached the low-built job and dropped to my knees, still on the left side. I peered inside and there was a bright piece of brilliant cloth on the seat. I pulled it out. Drapery from number five in the court. She was smart as hell to make a skirt of it. She was smart. I'd always known that. Except for a long time I hadn't known her mind ran in such deep, dark places.

I threw the drapery back into the

Ferrari and scanned the mountain above, my eyes going slowly from one side to the other, starting at the bottom. A cluster of small cedars gnarled and wind-beaten. Crumpled rock, shredding slowly, with nature's shredder, wind and sun and little rain. A deep crevice, a queer-shaped rock, like a man with his arms outflung. I felt the quiver in my guts as I resolved it as a rock and not a man. My eyes went on and then jumped back to the man-shaped rock. Something had moved up there, a flutter of motion, of color.

Her voice broke a little. "I—I'm hurt—don't shoot!"

Sweat ran down into my eyes and I heard my own breathing, rasping and hoarse, caused by a sickness and an excitement that ran through me. That voice had been with me a lot of the time in the past five years. Running away from a big city filled with memories, running away from myself, had deepened those memories, if anything. Adopting a new outlook and new clothes and a new job and a new life had helped some, too, but now and then, in the middle of the night I'd awaken, hearing that voice, from the bed beside me, from a corner of the room, from my kitchenette.

"Throw out your gun," I called. "Throw it hard."

Sun glinted on blue metal as it arched up and over, dislodged a shower of pebbles as it landed and slid downward into the road, its black muzzle pointing at me. The gun had killed this day.

"There it is," she called.

"Now the other one," I said.

"That's all. Just one, that's all I had."

I couldn't take a chance. "Take off your clothes," I said. "Take everything off but your bra and panties. Then stand up."

"I won't," she said.

"Then you have got another gun," I said.

There was nothing but painful silence and I could hear my heart beating. Then something bright came across the rock and settled on the rocky ground. "I'm undressing," she called, with a break in her voice. "As fast as I can."

My heart was pounding like something gone mad. There was a warm metallic taste in my mouth and I kept running my tongue over my lips because they were dry and felt cracked.

The sun was in her golden hair as she stood upright. She stood there and took a step out from behind the rock, her tall spectacular body almost bare, except for her bra, outthrust, bursting and the filmy, dainty pink garter belt that held the stockings on her long, beautiful legs. She wasn't wearing panties.

She looked just as she had the last time I'd seen her in the courtroom, a youthful twenty-eight, with the pink bloom of health in her

skin, her eyes soft and blue and demure with a softly rounding chin, a slender white neck that was made for her tall, flamboyant body. Her waistline was small, tiny enough for me to encircle it with my two hands. And I had. Her legs were those of a hosiery model, long, slim, wonderfully molded and beautifully muscled.

"My ankle," she said. "I hurt it—" She stopped, her eyes on me, staring and I could see the expression of fear go, to be replaced with a glint of happy knowledge. She breathed, "I can't believe it!"

"Where's the dough?" I asked.

She continued to look at me with her wide, blue eyes shining, her red lips parted slightly and her breast heaving visibly. She took a step toward me. "Mark, Mark, aren't you—"

"No," I interrupted her. "Where's the dough?"

Her eyes went expressionless and her face became a careful mask. She dropped her head to one side in a gesture I remembered. "There. Can I put my clothes on now?"

I shook my head and said, "Wait," and scrambled up the mountain. I picked her clothing up, piece by piece and felt each piece and passed it to her. "Okay. Put 'em on." I didn't look at her.

5.

While she dressed I went behind the rock. The two suitcases were there. I lifted one. It was heavy. I put it on top of a rock and opened it. It was filled with currency, neatly banded and neatly stacked, level with the top of the suitcase rim.

She finished dressing as I fondled the money and she came over and stood beside me and put her hand on my arm. Her hand was shaking and she was trembling all over. She whispered, "Half a million, Mark! Half a million—and just you and me!"

I knocked her hand off my arm. "Just me," I said. "You won't be around." I knelt and grabbed her ankle. "Which one did you hurt?"

Her face whitened. Her full red lips thinned out. "That's it."

I massaged it between my fingers, roughly, and she screamed and fell to the ground, her fingers pulling at my hand. I let her ankle go and said, "It's not broken."

"I slipped," she muttered, sweat on her forehead. She bit her lip. "Hurts like everything."

I wanted to laugh. Hurts like everything. Anyone listening in would think she was a nice girl. A nice girl who'd gone for a hike and fell down. Except she'd fallen down when she was about sixteen. In high school. Making her mark the easy way and from there it was a step to getting money from her male teachers by blackmail. Oh, I'd followed it all out, after I suspected. She was born for the way she lived. Rotten. All that beauty

hiding all that rottenness. I slapped her, then. I left the print of my fingers on her face.

It was like hitting a rock or a tree. She brushed the hair from her eyes and she raised her head. "A fortune, Mark. More than you'll ever see again. And there's just you and me. Mexico not more than a few hours away." Her words came in a mad rush and she was panting and I felt my heart begin a heavy, leaden pounding that made me shake.

I called her a name and hit her again with my open hand on the other cheek. Her head snapped over and she whimpered and that sound did something to me. "Get on your feet."

She had her chin on her chest. "I—I can't walk," she said.

We stared at each other for a long moment and I felt my heart step up its mad beat. I picked her up and carried her down the mountain, sliding down over the embankment, riding my heels in a small avalanche to the road, feeling her arms tighten around my neck, feeling the soft warmth of her body and smelling the fragrance of her perfume. Her hair tickled my ear. It had done that before; I remembered carrying her across the threshold of our little walkup. Carrying her across the creek on our honeymoon, not more than a dozen miles from this spot. And carrying her to bed a hundred times. An experience that never grew old.

I yanked open the department car door and eased her down on the seat. I took off her shoe and stood there with it in my hand. "Take off your sock," I said.

She half-smiled at that as she slowly raised her dress and unhooked the snaps on her garter belt and brushed the stocking down her slender leg with long, red-tipped fingers. Her head was bent. "You always called them socks," she said. She lifted her stocking from the tip of her foot and raised her head and looked at me again.

I kept my eyes on her feet and I could feel the slow, painful hammering of my heart and my breath didn't come easy. I leaned over and took her ankle in my hand and she screamed. Her ankle had turned purple and was swollen. "We'll take care of it," I said, "at the jail." I raised my head and looked at her. There was a bruise on her cheek where I'd hit her. I wanted to touch it, to caress her, and I blocked those thoughts from my mind. "That's where you're going, you know. Jail. Just like any other criminal."

She lay back against the seat and closed her eyes. "Just like any other criminal," she repeated. She opened her eyes but she didn't look at me. "My biggest crime, Mark, was loving you. It wrecked me. Completely."

"Save it," I said. "Save it all." I went back up the mountain and got the two suitcases and lugged

them to the car. I threw them on the back seat and went around and crawled under the wheel. I took the gun she'd thrown to me out of my right coat pocket, and slipped it into the other pocket, on my left. I reached for the ignition.

She put her hand on mine, holding tight. "Wait, Mark. Please. Let's talk, just for a moment. There'll be a lot of time on my hands back there but I won't feel like talking. I've—"

I flung her hand away. "Don't tell me anything," I said, "unless you want to make a formal statement."

She relaxed in an alluring huddle on the seat. Her dress was high on her thighs, her slip falling an inch or so below. She saw me staring and a tiny smile of triumph—or hope—flickered in her blue eyes. "There must be something you want to hear," she said. She looked past me, to the rugged, colorful, mountains that marched off northward. "Remember our honeymoon—remember, Mark? It was near here—"

I didn't want to remember but I couldn't help myself. I couldn't keep from remembering. A tent beside a stream, up in the timbered country. Trees all around and the quiet and the feeling we were alone in the world. I only wondered that she remembered, too.

"You do remember," she said, her face close to my arm. "I can see it in your face, Mark." Her fingers reached up and touched my cheek, wandered past my ear to entangle my hair. My hat fell off. I pushed her away and got my hat and put it on and started the car. I began backing, leaning out the open door, looking for a place I could turn.

She turned off the ignition.

I wanted to hit her but I didn't. I sat there in a sort of stupid anguish, wanting to hit her but not doing it because there was something else holding me back. Maybe it was the memories of those days when I didn't work, on my days off, when I'd sleep late. She'd come into the bedroom with a bed tray piled high with grapefruit fixed for easy eating, poached eggs on toast, bacon fried crisp and jelly she'd made, and the morning paper tucked under her arm. She'd fix my pillows and kiss me and fuss over me and I loved it. Maybe I loved it more than I should, but then I'd been an orphan kid all my life and was starved for that sort of thing. I guess I'd have spent the rest of my life at her feet if she hadn't stepped out on me. If I hadn't investigated when I suspected.

"*Why'd you do it?*" I asked.

"You didn't trust me," she said.

"What's that got to do with it?"

She smiled and there was no humor in the smile. "Your suspicions—your careful tour of the house when you came home. Your third degree every time I went out. Your third degree about my day—all that started it."

I could only wonder. "I'm me," I said. "I don't believe—what the hell difference does it make? We're going."

"You are," she said, "the only man I ever loved. And still love. But you did everything—"

"Shut up," I said. "Shut up."

But she came close to me, whispering, her lips close to my ear and she was saying things and I was listening to them, because I wanted to; listening to them and remembering the hot sensuality of her body against mine, the urgency of her fierce possessiveness and how it was never the same with any other woman in the years after. And then somehow, we were back at the Ferrari and I was doing things that I didn't think about.

6.

She said, "Hurry, hurry," looking at the sky and looking back over the road, with anxiety in the wrinkle on her forehead. She lowered her eyes to mine as I stood at the open trunk of the police special with the red gallon can of gasoline in my hand. She ran to me and hugged me and pulled my head down and kissed me and all the old feelings came back with a rush and I didn't think about the years in between.

"Walk back down the road and keep watch," I said, just to get her away from me, half-hoping that might make some difference.

There was no difference . . . I put the gallon of gasoline in the Ferrari. I squatted there and found a stick of gum in my pocket and chewed it and then punched a hole in the department car gas tank with a screwdriver and got another gallon from there. I used the wad of gum to seal up the hole while I dumped the gas in the Ferrari's tank. I got less than a gallon the next time and that was it.

I took the two suitcases out of the police special and put them in the Ferrari. Then I called her and got her in the low-built job and I went back to the department car and got it started and drove it over the edge of the road. I got out then and muscled it over and watched it go end over end and then bounce and careen into a dry creek bed a thousand feet below. I breathed deep and then went over and crawled under the wheel of the Ferrari.

She slid close to me. I could feel the warmth of her hip and thigh. She put her head against my arm. She let out a contented little sigh.

We drove on and I didn't think about anything except the road ahead.

After awhile she said, "Look!"

I stopped the car and looked out. A high-flying plane. I could tell it was an Air Force plane, but it made me think of the sheriff's flying posse. "We'd better get out of sight, off the road. Keep looking for a place to turn out."

I drove on.

A few miles later she said, "How's this?"

I braked to a stop. A dry wash cut across the road, angling upward and under a spread of stunted cedar. But high enough to drive the Ferrari under. I backed and pulled out over the rough rock, bouncing along, with the motor roaring. We got under the cedars and I cut the motor. While I stood there a low-flying plane came droning over. I got a glimpse of it and saw the Civil Air Patrol marking on it. That added up.

"They're looking for us with planes," I said.

"What'll we do?" she asked.

We looked at each other. "Stay here until dark," I said. "Then drive on without lights." I sat down on the ground and picked up a handful of pebbles and began tossing them at the car.

She got one of the suitcases out and on the ground. She opened it and she riffled through a bundle of bills, with a loose look on her face, almost a look of sensuality.

"It's money," I said and threw all my pebbles away.

She looked at me. "Yes. Everything will be all right."

"We've got no food," I said. "I don't know where we'll get any."

She fondled the money. "I'm not hungry," she said.

"You will be," I said angrily. "And I will, too."

She put the money away and shut the suitcase and crawled over to me. She put her arms around my neck. "Something will turn up."

"Yeah," I said. "A Boy Scout will come along with a full pack."

She tightened her arms around my neck. "I wish we were back like we were," she said. "Long, long ago."

I pushed her away. I lay back with my head on my arms and looked up through the cedar into the sky. It was the bluest sky I'd ever seen. There wasn't a cloud in sight. A soft, warm wind fanned my cheek. The world was a beautiful place but it was filled with ugliness and I had a feeling all the dirt was concentrated in me. I felt a burning contempt for myself. "I don't know why," I said, "I did it. I don't know why."

Her fingers were on my cheek. "A half a million," she said. "Who wouldn't?"

"A lot of people wouldn't," I said bitterly and wished I was one of them.

"Back east," she said, "there was the payoff. This is no different."

"There wasn't a murdered kid," I said. "There wasn't much killing, except those that deserved to die."

Her eyes clouded and her face twisted. "That was Ball," she cried softly. "I didn't know what he was doing, Mark, I swear it!"

"But after you saw all the dough," I said, "that changed things."

She nodded. "The payoff—what's so different?"

"It's different out here," I said, wishing that it were so. "I came out here to get away from it—and you. The cops here, most of them, are clean and straight. And here I was one who didn't have to worry nights. I felt good."

7.

Another plane came over after awhile. It was one of the air posse. The shadow of its wings fled over the earth and went on and the sound died in the distance. The sun crept toward the western horizon. The wind rose and brought bits of dust and sand. She crawled on the lee side of me and lay close to me to keep out of the wind. She said, "I wish we were like we were when we started. With nothing on our minds but each other."

I said nothing.

"I really loved you, Mark," she said. "You're the only man I ever loved."

"Shut up," I said. "You don't know anything about love."

"I'll shut up, but I do."

After awhile, she said, "I'm thirsty."

"Put a pebble in your mouth," I told her.

She put a pebble between her red lips and lay back down. She said, "Remember our trip—"

"Don't drag up that stuff," I said. I raised, listening for a moment and then lay back down. I looked at my watch. In about an hour it'd be dark. And we'd go on. To where, I wondered, with an inward desperation. Always running, always afraid.

"What're you thinking?" she asked.

"About being hunted," I said.

"Sort of a different business for you," she said.

I heard the sound again and sat up.

"What's the matter?"

"I thought I heard a car."

"You're hearing things," she said.

I lay back again. I felt the pressure on my coat pocket and I grabbed at it. I didn't get there in time. The black muzzle of the gun looked at me as she backed away from me on her knees and one hand. The gun didn't waver.

"Be careful, Mark," she said softly.

"Why?" I asked, thinking she could have picked a better time.

"I don't know," she said. "Maybe I've just learned something."

Her skin was smooth and clear. Her eyes were blue and clear, too. A little wisp of blonde hair waved in front of her eyes. She was beautiful. I let myself go for a moment. She was as beautiful as any woman I'd ever seen.

"What now?"

"Take out your handcuffs," she said. "Do it slow, Mark. Don't make me pull the trigger."

"All right." I said, and suddenly nothing made any difference any more. I wasn't mad, now. Just sort

of sick, as I handed her the cuffs.

She looked at me for a long speculative moment. "Put one of them on your wrist, Mark. Your right wrist."

I did as she told me.

She raised her head, listening intently.

I could hear it too, then. The sound of a motor, coming up the grade, beyond where the police car went over the edge of the road.

"Get over to the car, Mark. Hurry."

I came to my feet and walked over to the car.

"Here," she said. "By the rear wheel. Get down on your knees."

She stepped back and the hammer clicked on the pistol. "Kneel down, Mark," she said. "There by the wheel."

I said, "All right," and got down on my knees.

"Put the other cuff on the wire wheel," she said.

I did it and the snap of the lock was a metallic click that went all the way through me.

She stepped over and got my pistol out of the holster and threw it away. Then she said, "Listen for a moment. No matter what has happened, you're the only man I've ever loved."

She leaned close and for a moment her hair brushed my cheek. Then her lips were on mine. They were cold. She pulled away and went limping down the hill, toward the road.

The car was near now, the motor racing. Down below, I couldn't see her any longer. A moment later I heard a shot.

8.

Ortega came into sight first, running up the wash with a pistol in his hand. He stopped running when he saw me and came on at a walk. He knelt there beside me and unlocked the cuffs.

I stood up, rubbing my wrists. "Where is she?"

He jerked his head. "Down there," he said. "In the road, chief." His voice sounded tight. He looked at me in a funny way and kept on looking. I rubbed the back of my hand across my mouth and it came away red.

Steve Ortega turned to the suitcases and lifted them and started down toward the road while I stared at the red smear on the back of my hand.

I went down the dry wash, came out on the road and stood there for a moment. She lay in the middle of the road, her blonde hair lying in a vivid golden swirl about her shapely head. The blue steel pistol was in her right hand. The sheriff's deputies stood looking down at her.

"Damn good looker," one of them said.

I kept my eyes straight ahead and didn't look as I passed. I got into the car and waited for the others.

burst of glory

"Better get a good look at me while you can," thought Irving Murphy. "I'm history."

BY
JOSEPH BROPHY

OTTIE . . ."
"Ottie, Honey . . ."
"Now, Ottie . . ."

It didn't sound quite right. He reached into his jacket pocket, extracted a pack of Waterfords, shook one out, placed it in the precise center of his mouth, and lit it, having forgotten to squeeze the grey band. He took a deep drag and resumed composing his explanation.

"Ottie, I'm awfully—I'm terribly—I'm damned sorry . . ."

Then he heard a voice like a tuba playing in a mine shaft: "Hey, mister. Can't you read signs?"

He looked up, mildly startled, at a big colored transit cop. "Hm?"

"That's a cigarette you've got in your hand," he said with a patronizing grin, "and that sign (he pointed with a stubby pencil, as if it were heavy as the world) says 'No Smoking! This is a subway, you know. I'm giving you a summons."

As the cop wrote out the summons, the little fat man who hardly gloried in the name of Irving Murphy, the Irving the suggestion of a Jewish lady who had been a dear friend of the family, looked down at the Waterford that had smouldered halfway down to his fingertips, unsmoked.

"Oh! I'm so sorry! I forgot all about it. You know, I've been riding this subway train for . . ."

"Fifteen years," the cop concluded. "Here." The cop sighed from his shoes, and handed Irving his summons.

"Oh, no," Irving explained timidly. "Sixteen years. No—fourteen. Seventeen? That's funny. You know, it's slipped my—" He refocused his eyes from his cigarette butt to see the cop passing into the next car. He had stuffed the summons in Irving's shirt pocket.

Irving was puzzled for a moment, and then he smiled at a tired looking young lady sitting across from him. "Isn't it nice how they have policemen in all the subways, now?" he said.

The girl blinked slowly, and stared more intently at the Wrigley sign above Irving's head.

"Irving, Irving, why? Why again? Why this job? Just when we're getting back on our feet again after you . . ."

Irving was getting upset. Ottie had dominated the discussion since he got home. In fact, Ottie had carried on the entire discussion. Irving never had to tell Ottie anything. Now he made an attempt at a conciliatory smile. "Now Ottie . . ."

"Now Ottie! Now Ottie, he gives me! Now Ottie, now Ottie." Her face was growing white under its rouge. her jowls trembling. She grew more shrill: "Don't give me 'Now Ottie's,' Irving! Tell me why you lost your job!"

"Well, there were these two packages . . ."

"Two packages? You forget—no, don't tell me you forgot which was which. You switched labels. A shipping clerk, and he switches labels. A shipping clerk, he calls himself. Irving—they did get them back." She didn't need an answer. "Valuable, Irving? Again we pay?"

Irving was not totally intimidated. "Now Ottie, it was just a mistake. Can't anybody make a mistake?"

"Yes, one. Last time it was a whole car we pay for, because you lose all the sales papers. What is it this time? The Crown Jewels?"

"Just a ring."

"Just a ring. Just a ring. And, naturally, you did something with the insurance slip."

Irving was silent, crushed. "I forgot," was all he could say.

"You forgot! You forgot! I've had enough of your forgetting. I'm leaving. I don't know where I'll go —O, my poor mother, at least she never lived to see what a fool I was —I don't know where I'll go, but . . ."

Irving did not wait to hear any more.

Irving lived in a less fortunate section of Washington Heights, on Audubon Avenue at 174*th* Street. Whenever he felt depressed, he went to a fish store on St. Nicholas Avenue and had a few oysters. It was four blocks to the fish store, past tenements that varied in condition from genteely poor to unabashedly squalid. Children, mostly Cubans now, ran up and down the streets, or played catch, or had fights, or sometimes just sat on stoops and stared. Irving did not like the way they stared at him, as if he were another piece of newspaper drifting by. At least an old newspaper had been news, once.

Uncheered, he passed a Chinese laundry, whose front window displayed a stencilled sign reading, 'SHIRTS EXPERTLY DONE—25¢. TRY US.' Other than this, the window was empty, save for a faded poster advertizing *The Guns of Navarone*. Irving smiled a little at

this. He had liked that picture—he guessed the laundryman had, too, or he wouldn't have kept the poster three years. Or was it four years? He couldn't remember. Anyhow, that explosion scene had been great.

The mountain was exploding for the third time in Irving's mind, when he crossed St. Nicholas Avenue—forgetting to look at the light—and made the other side with the unconscious ease of a lifelong jaywalker. Irving kind of enjoyed jaywalking, too. He had always gotten a thrill out of breaking the law, although he had never been accused of doing anything worse than smoking on the subway an hour before.

When he walked into the fish store, Pete, the big Greek who owned the place, was talking to Garcia the bus driver about the Mets' chances of finishing in the first division. It didn't interest Irving, who was a disillusioned Yankee fan. Irving stood in front of them for awhile, until Pete looked up. Irving didn't have to say anything. Pete shook his head, and went in back, emerging with a few shellfish, opened, on a paper plate. Irving tried to add a few words to the conversation, but Garcia had started cursing Swoboda for an error the day before, and Irving couldn't compete, so he turned to his oysters for company. They were clams.

"Hey, Pete." Pete wasn't listening. Garcia was wrapping up his cursing with a crackling volley of Spanish expletives, and Pete was enthralled. Finally Garcia stopped for a breath. "Pete," said Irving, "these are clams. I always have oysters."

"Not in August you don't," said Pete offhandedly.

"Oh, it's August?"

"All month."

Irving felt foolish. He gave his clams to Garcia, who was now vividly describing somebody's jump off one of the new high-rise apartments on Broadway, paid for them, and walked out.

It was awhile later that he found himself in front of a construction site, watching them blast. He got a modest thrill when the steel mats heaved, and the ground shook, but he was still very depressed. Here he was almost fifty, and he hadn't made the earth shake even once. He hadn't even slammed doors, much. He had never made news, or done anything exciting, even during the War. He had been too short to get into the service. It was news if he could hold a job for a year. The biggest thing he had ever done was elope with Ottie, and that had been his biggest mistake. There was only one possible solution—he would kill himself. Like that guy off the apartment building.

He turned that over for awhile, but it didn't seem quite right. Suicide, yes, but off a building? Too common. Everybody jumps off buildings. Big deal. Out on the ledge, alone with the wind, and

wait for a crowd—an audience—maybe a few cops or a priest, a *Daily News* photographer. Then jump, splat. You get your picture in the center section of the *News*, Garcia mentions you in passing the next day, and then you're forgotten.

No, it had to be something more spectacular. Above all, Irving Murphy didn't want to be forgotten. He forgot things all the time, and deep down, he knew that was to get back for being forgotten. If the world forgets you, forget it. If it ignores you, ignore it. If it hurts you, hurt it. That's the idea. But how? His death would be insignificant.

Then he let out a hideous, Boris Karloff laugh. His plot was so evil it scared him. He would blow himself up! He would take a suitcase full of high explosives, go into a crowded place, and bango! Him and four hundred other people, all blown to smithereens! Irving Murphy, one man disaster area. Front page news. *Extra* news. ANGRY MAN'S LAST GESTURE OF DEFIANCE—over a photo of—of—yes, it had to be—Grand Central Station! Grand Central Station, strewn with the bodies of his victims! The scene leaped into his mind, terribly clear—a crowded terminal at the rush hour. Mr. Boyle, that bastard who fired him, hurrying for a cab; a deafening blast; bodies flying, glass shaltering; screams; gore raining down—and all over every front page in the country . . . Glorious, glorious!

It did not take him long to make his plan. In a few days, all was ready. It had been easy to steal a suitcase full of dynamite from the blasting shed one night. There was no watchman, and police were far between. Picking the lock on the powder shed was simplicity itself.

The detonator took a little thinking. Finally he made it out of an old flashlight, removing the bulb and the switch. He connected two leads to an electric blasting cap, connecting one to a battery through the bulb socket, and threading the other around out of the switch hole. He connected another lead to the rear battery, and threaded that through the switch hole too. Now, when he touched the two exposed leads, he would complete the circuit, and, blooie! Sixty pounds of dynamite, sky high, and with it a station full of helpless people.

Irving chose Monday as the day. Sunday he typed up letters to all the papers, enclosing a photo in each, to mail the following morning. He would set off the blast at nine, at the height of the rush, so the afternoon papers would all carry his name in eighty point type, not to mention the nationwide-worldwide-TV and radio hookups that would make him the biggest thing since Bluebeard.

Irving Murphy was on the downtown IND express at eight-thirty Monday morning, his new blue suit case on the seat beside him, much

to the discomfiture of the standees. It was hot on the train, but he did not sweat. His face was dry, his teeth showing in a savage grin. From time to time he cackled drily to himself, and when people stared, he just stared back and leered. "Better get a good look at me while you can," he thought, "I'm history."

He ran the two blocks underground between the Port Authority Terminal, where the Eighth Avenue trains stop, and the Times Square shuttle to Grand Central. The grin never left his face as he raced past the Levy's Jewish Rye ads, and the theatre posters that lined the tile walls. His suitcase felt light, and he handled it like a weapon, almost knocking down a fat little old Italian lady in a flowered dress, and a mailman. He might have. He did not stop to look.

When he reached the turnstile to the shuttle, he ripped his jacket in his haste to drag the clumsy suitcase through, and when he reached the packed train, he used it as a battering ram to open a space for him to stand.

As the train roared to Grand Central, the rumble of the wheels sounded like the exhultant echo of his explosion, and the squeal of the brakes, the cries of the wounded. As he climbed the steps into the station, he cackled, and when he passed a Union News stand, he glanced at the cluttered front pages of the morning papers. The front page of the next edition of every paper in the city would carry only one story—Irving Murphy.

As the corridor opened, up into the swarming floor of the upper level, he was not disappointed. Only the thought that those now leaving would escape death marred his ecstacy. These, these and no others must escort his soul to hell.

Panting, he pressed through the crowds to a point between the information center and an auto display. Here the crowd was thickest. It would be here!

For a long moment he stood and absorbed the grandeur of the place, and the sight and smell and mutter of the multitude. Their destinies, and his, now, for the first time, were in his hands. What did it matter if it were the last? He was immortal!

He choked a howl of triumph, and gloried in the ache of his fierce jaws, the glitter in his terrible eyes —in his power, his greatness, his evil immortality.

Then, slowly, wondering at the power in his hands, he bent down and uncoiled the wires from the suitcase handle.

And as he touched the leads, the last image on his retina was the unmailed letters falling from his pocket, and scattering on the floor . . .

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KILL HIM FOR ME

She sat there watching me, her eyes strange and staring. Suddenly, she put her hand on my knee. "How much would you charge to kill a man?"

A NOVELETTE

BY

JOHN G. ALLEN

It was one of those days when all I wanted to do was prop up a bar and drink. I was starting on my third scotch and my cigar butt was almost ready for the ashtray, when she walked in.

Some women can enter a bar and after a brief glance, you turn back to your drink. But not this one. She was in her middle twenties, her rust coloured costume was exquisitely designed and around her shoulders she wore a silver fox wrap.

She had dark auburn hair, green eyes and classical features. She was of medium height and walked with the easy grace of a woman who is confident of her appearance. On her feet she had open toed shoes with four inch stilleto heels, which emphasized a pair of legs so shapely, I could hardly tear my eyes off them.

I watched her in the bar mirror as she sat on a high stool a few yards away from me. The barman smiled at her.

He got a glass, hesitated, then moved back to her. She nodded her head, then I heard her words.

"Yes. A large brandy."

Her voice was slightly husky, but cultured. The barman placed the brandy in front of her.

"Soda water?" he asked.

She did not answer, but picked up the glass and drank the brandy straight back. A shudder went through her as she put the glass on the bar.

"Same again," she demanded.

I realized the cigar butt was burning my fingers and stubbed it out in an ashtray.

The barman placed another double in front of her and again, she drank it straight back. She pushed the empty glass at the barman and he filled it again.

I moved half a yard towards her and said to Joe, the barman.

"A double for me, Joe."

He gave me the scotch, I raised the glass to her.

"What are we celebrating?"

She glanced at me as though I had said some rude words.

Then she said some, softly, as though to herself.

"The bastard. The dirty rotten bastard."

Picking up her glass, she slowly drank the brandy until the glass was half empty, then placed it very carefully on the bar, like people do when they know they are getting tight.

She turned herself to face me.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't talking to you."

"That's O.K." I grinned. "I don't mind being called that, if I know what I've done."

She sipped her brandy, then looked at me, hard like.

"Do you really want to toast something?"

I smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

"All right. What do we toast?"

She raised her glass. Her eyes seemed misty and her lower lip quivered.

"To the death of a dirty bastard called, Lenny Carlisle." And she tossed back the remainder of her brandy, threw a £1. note on the bar, slid off the stool and walked out.

It was no business of mine what the woman did—but I finished my drink and followed her just the same.

Like I said, she had a nice graceful movement about her, but my thoughts were not graceful as I watched her moving along the footpath, a few yards in front of me.

Parked against the kerb was a big gleaming Mercedes Benz and eyeing it enviously, was a young cop.

The woman's legs wobbled a little, the brandy was now taking effect.

She stopped at the car and began to fumble in her handbag.

After a few seconds, she took out a key ring and tried to put the key in the door lock. At the third attempt, she made it. As the car door swung open, the young cop moved forward.

"This your car madam?"

The woman looked at him haughtily.

"Of course it is. Do you think I'm stealing it?"

The cop was persistent.

"Of course not madam, but I saw you park it a while ago and go into that bar, and you don't seem too steady—"

I moved forward, put my hand firmly on her arm, then smiled at the cop.

"That's all right constable. My wife was coming to meet me."

I do not know who looked the most surprised, the woman, or the cop. I half pushed the woman into the car. Took the key ring out of her hand and sat down behind the wheel. I shut the car door, smiled briefly at the cop and drove the car away.

The traffic was busy, but with a Mercedes Benz, you seem to have that extra luck. For the price, it should be included as an accessory.

All the lights were green for me and we shot away out of bustling London and into the quiet countryside of Surrey.

The woman had sat there in a half stupefied state.

At last she spoke.

"Why did you do that. Are you mad or something?"

I glanced at her and grinned.

"One question at a time. The first one. Why did I drive you away?"

She nodded her head.

"Because that cop would have booked you as soon as you sat behind the wheel."

She touched my arm with her hand.

"Thank you. It was very quick and thoughtful of you."

I glanced at her again.

"Now the second question. Am I mad or something?"

I looked at her, she was watching me carefully.

"Yes, I'm mad. Mad about gorgeous auburn-haired women who walk into my life."

She began to laugh. It was a deep husky laugh that was impulsive.

"You are all right—whatever your name is. Mine is Laura."

"McGrath, Frank McGrath." I answered.

"Frank McGrath," she repeated.

"I like that."

"Good, now we are even." I grinned.

"I live in Reigate," she said. "Would you be good enough to drive me home?"

"I saw your address on the key ring, you are halfway home already, Laura."

"You are quite a character Frank. What do you do for a living?"

I overtook a Jaguar that was cruising along at about seventy miles per hour.

"I'm a Private Detective."

The driver of the Jaguar did not like being overtaken and was pushing hard behind me.

I let the Jag. get within twenty yards of us then almost left him standing. I took a sharp left hand bend without hardly a murmur from the tyres, then Laura spoke.

"Do you earn much money?"

The turning to Reigate was not far away, but I still put my foot down hard on the accelerator.

Whoever was driving the Jag. gave it up and accepted second place.

We turned into the lane that led to Reigate and drove down it. Nice and easy like.

"Money? What's money?" I asked.

"There is a hotel about a hundred yards away. Pull up there. I want to talk to you," she said.

The Mercedes Benz rolled into the gravel car park. I let it do a

three point turn and left the car in an easy position to drive away.

She opened her door and was walking towards the bar while I was locking the doors.

She seemed to know her way around the place.

The hotel was of the olde worlde type, with low ceilings—timber beams and brass ornamental work on the walls.

I bought her a tomato juice with lashings of Worcester sauce. I had a scotch and soda.

We sat in the corner on wide leather seating which she chose while I had been buying the drinks.

She raised her drink to me and smiled.

"Cheers—and thanks a lot.'

"That's all right." I said with what I hoped was my Sunday smile.

We sipped our drinks then suddenly, she blurted out.

"You look as though you can take care of yourself. Can I hire your services?"

I looked at her steadily for a few seconds.

"I don't handle divorce cases."

"Who is talking about a divorce case?" she snapped back. "I want you to frighten the life out of someone."

"Look. I know I'm not a glamour boy—but my face isn't that bad." I cracked back at her.

"I'm serious," she said.

"If it's legal I may accept."

"What do you charge?" she asked.

"Fifty pounds a week, plus expenses.

She finished the tomato juice and rose to her feet.

"Come on. Drive me home and I'll tell you all about it."

For once in my life, I left a drink unfinished. With this woman I was intoxicated enough already.

The address was in the Reigate hills. Stockbrokers, company chairmen and other wealthy people occupied the large houses dotted across the hillside.

"Timberlands" Laura's house was aptly named.

The drive up to the house was through a young forest of silver birch trees which ended with an expanse of lawn that you could have layed out a nine hole golf course on. The house was of Tudor design and alongside it was a three car garage.

"Leave the car in front," she said. "The chauffeur will put it away."

She led the way up three steps to the front door. Even with my best light grey suit and clean underclothes on, I felt a little subdued.

A maid met us at the door.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Barnard," she said.

"Good afternoon," answered Laura and handed her the fur wrap.

"I have some business to discuss with this gentleman. I do not wish to be disturbed."

"Yes, madam." The maid answered and Laura walked across the large hallway and opened a door.

I followed her into a lushly furnished room. The carpet was so thick, it tickled my ankles and the furniture looked so expensive, I was frightened to touch it.

"Sit down," she said. "And have a drink."

"Don't you think you have had enough," I said.

She glared at me.

"To hell with it, I want one."

I sat down on a large settee and pulled out my wallet.

"Before we go any further, have a look at my credentials," I said and handed some papers to her.

They were mainly references from a bank I once did some investigation work for and a diamond company with shops in Bond Street and offices in Hatton Garden.

She glanced at them and passed them back.

"Scotch and soda?"

I shook my head and put the papers back into my wallet.

She passed me a drink just the same and poured herself a large one and sat down beside me, displaying just enough of her knees to keep my interest, not that it was lagging any.

"Were you in the forces?" she asked.

I took a good drink of the scotch.

"Marine Commandos," I answered, "Why?"

"Did you kill anyone?"

"Look—that was a long time ago, I want to forget—"

She sat there watching me, her eyes seemed strange and staring. Suddenly, she put her hand on my knee.

"How much would you charge to kill a man?"

I moved away from her.

"You're joking!"

"I'm serious. Five hundred pounds?— All right, a thousand pounds to kill a man?"

I looked round the room.

Perhaps I'd stumbled in on Candid Camera or something. But the woman was rambling on.

"Just think Frank. One thousand pounds to kill a man. Just one man. Lenny Carlisle. Kill him for me!"

I knocked my scotch back and rose to my feet.

"Look lady. I've seen you home safely. Let's call it a day. If you don't mind, I'll be going."

She rose to her feet with difficulty.

"I'll get the chauffeur to drive you back to London."

I was protesting that it wasn't necessary, when she rang a bell.

The door opened and a good looking lad in chauffeur's uniform came into the room. He would be about six foot two inches tall, well made, with one of those perfect faces some women go crazy for.

"Throw him out, Charles," said the woman as though she was talking about the cat.

I tried to laugh, but it dried on my face. She was serious. So was he.

He moved easily, his hands low and slightly forward, as though he had studied Karate.

I moved one step backwards.

He moved two steps forward.

I threw a left. He blocked it naturally with his right and lashed at my neck with his left. I ducked under it, then swung my right foot across and the toe of my shoe hit him hard on his right knee. His mouth opened wide and while he was hopping on one leg, I slugged him as hard as I could with my right fist. It hit him on the side of the jaw and spun him sideways. I moved in close and left hooked him in the stomach.

He went down on his knees, spitting blood out of his mouth. I stood over him, waiting for him to get up.

Then he dived at me, his head hitting me in the stomach.

We both went over the settee, with me underneath. His hands were at my throat, the thumbs working hard. I could hardly breathe and my head was pounding.

My knees came up between his legs and connected. He gave a loud moan and the pressure on my throat was released. I grabbed his left arm, rolled him over face down and stuck his arm right up his back.

"I'll break this for you if you give another squeak," I snarled.

"Let go—let go," he screamed.

I stood heavily on his neck for good measure when I stepped over him and staggered to the door.

The woman was still there, a glazed look in her eyes.

"That was marvellous," she said in a strange voice. "Just marvellous."

"Glad you liked it. Don't bother, I'll let myself out."

I staggered through the hall and opened the front door.

The Mercedes was still there, but I didn't want a car stealing rap stuck on me, so I began walking. Past the large green lawn, down the long gravel drive, through the silver birch trees. No one took a shot at me, or tried to run me down with a car. But you can't be lucky all the time can you?

Chapter 2

For the next three days I was busy tying up the loose ends on a car swindling racket. Some smart operators had been obtaining money from hire purchase firms for selling expensive cars. The trouble was that they had been selling the same cars over and over again, through different hire purchase companies.

There were no real buyers and by the time the hire purchase com-

panies had smelt a rat, the gang had disappeared.

I had been hired by one of the finance companies and was able to trace some of the gang. Then it was up to the Scotland Yard Fraud Squad to complete the long and tedious prosecution.

By Thursday my work was completed and I dropped into my office to see what kind of mail I had been receiving.

I hardly had time to open the first letter when the telephone rang. I gave my number and then I heard a woman's laugh over the telephone.

"Hello—who is that?" I said.

"Mr. McGrath. Is that you?" the woman's voice answered.

I had a strange feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Yeah—this is McGrath. Who is that?"

"Laura. We met a few days ago. Don't say you have forgotten me."

Her voice was soft, yet husky and so coaxing.

"Forgotten you!" I almost shouted.

"I try to do someone a good turn and end up getting thrown out of their house."

"You did not get thrown out darling," she said. Then I heard her giggling.

"What's so funny?" I snarled.

"I'd never met anyone like you before . . . a private detective—"

"So what?" I growled. "The breed is dying out."

"I apologise," she said quietly. "But I wanted to see how tough you really were."

"How is your chauffeur feeling?" I said.

She laughed out, there was something impulsive about her that I found fascinating.

"Poor Charles. I gave him a month's pay and discharged him."

"What for?" I asked.

"What for?" she repeated after me. "Apart from my good impression of him being spoilt by you beating him up in front of me, I felt it better for him not to be in my house if you were going to visit me."

"Visit you!" my mouth was saying.

"I wouldn't come near your house again for a pension."

I didn't neither, not that day. But I did agree to meet her in Joe's Bar in an hour's time.

Joe's Bar at noon was fairly quiet. I took the drinks to one of the small booths at the back where I could watch for her coming in.

The weather was warm for late April and at five past twelve, she walked in and glanced around. I moved forward to greet her. Her dark auburn hair was swept back from her face and she was wearing a sleeveless lemon silk creation with a plunging neckline, which showed off her figure to the best effect. Almost. Only nature could do that.

She offered her right hand to me

and we shook hands as though we were being formally introduced at some cocktail party.

When we had sat down, sipped our drinks and she had half smoked a cigarette, she looked up at me and said.

"It's not easy what I have to tell you."

"What do you mean. Not easy?"

She drew heavily on her cigarette and blew out the smoke.

"I'm being blackmailed," she blurted out.

There was no one at our end of the bar to hear what she had said.

"Have you been to the police?" I asked.

She shook her head. "I couldn't."

"Why not?"

She began to tremble. "It is so embarrassing. I couldn't explain it to them."

"But you are going to explain it to me." I said.

She looked straight into my eyes, with those green eyes of hers, that seemed to have an hypnotic effect on me.

"There is something about you that makes me feel at ease."

I picked up my drink.

"Before you begin, let's go back to my office."

We finished our drinks and walked out.

Back in my office, I dusted the seat of her chair with my handkerchief before she sat down.

She started another cigarette and I lit a cigar. I sat back in my chair and let her tell me all about it. In her own words, in her own time. Whatever it was, my tape recorder could pick it all up for me.

She told me she was twenty six years old and had been a successful career woman in the cosmetic business.

A year previously, she had married for the first time, a man twenty years older than herself. He was wealthy, had controlling interests in several large businesses and was also charming and pleasant to be with.

That was, until they had married. Then his charm faded and he became jealous of every man she met, until they were constantly quarrelling.

His business took him to Europe and America and she frankly admitted that the marriage was now only a facade.

She was still the perfect hostess at his impressive society parties, but they were now leading separate lives.

She stopped talking, the difficult part was coming now. I prompted her.

"Then what happened?"

She stubbed out her cigarette and almost immediately, lit another one, then looked on the floor as she spoke.

"I went to a party one night in the West End. It was rather wild. I'd had plenty to drink and I went back to this man's flat."

"Which man?" I asked.

She looked up from the floor and into my face.

"Lenny Carlisle."

"What happened?"

"Do I have to tell you?" she half whispered.

I leaned forward over my desk.

"If I'm going to help you. I want to know everything. Everything."

She sighed very deeply.

"When we got to his flat, he wanted me to go to bed with him. I don't know what was in the drinks, but I seemed to have no control over myself. It must have been then when I passed out and don't remember any more about the night."

I took a good draw on my cigar.

"And now you have had some photographs, taken that night, sent to you?"

"How did you know?"

"Never mind about that. How much do they want?"

"At first it was one hundred pounds, then two hundred."

She had begun to cry. I let her. When she had finished she would feel better. She blew her nose and dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"The photographs were not just of that pig Carlisle. There were other men in bed with me. But I swear I had never seen them before in my life."

I opened my drawer and gave her a glass of my office scotch. She drank it, her hand was shaking.

"When we married, my husband gave me a large number of shares in his companies. Now they want the shares."

She was looking completely exhausted, but I had to keep her going on.

"Have you told your husband?"

She looked at me with red rimmed eyes.

"Of course not. That's just what he would like."

"How do you make your payments?"

"I give it to Lenny Carlisle in cash and each time, he hands me another photograph of one of those horrible men in bed with me."

"Have you a photograph with you?"

She opened her handbag, then hesitated.

"Come on." I said, "If I'm going to help you, I must know everything."

She passed a small foolscap envelope to me. I opened it and four glossy photographs fell onto my desk.

I looked up at Laura.

Her face was crimson with embarrassment.

Each photograph was taken in the same room. It was a well furnished bedroom. On the bed lay Laura completely naked, but with her eyes closed. There was also a man in bed with her, a different man in each picture.

The poses had obviously been set up and were all obscene.

The men's faces could be clearly seen, and Laura's was distinct in each one.

It was a filthy racket all right.

Pick a wealthy woman, get her drunk or drugged—then set the cameras rolling. It was money in the bank for them. I felt sick.

I took out my Ronson lighter and set light to each photograph, until only ashes were left. Then I poked them to fragments with a pencil.

Laura looked half dead.

It had been a terrible ordeal telling me, but having to show me the photographs was worse still.

I poured her another scotch and one for myself.

The next few minutes I spent getting down all the details of this Lenny Carlisle and any of Laura's friends whom she could remember were at the party. This had been a set up with a capital 'S'.

"Leave everything to me." I told her.

"It may be a few days before I have something. But I will. I promise you that."

After she had left, I switched on the tape recording of our conversation.

Now the hard work was going to begin. And it was going to be especially hard for Lenny Carlisle.

It was two days before I finally got a lead on Carlisle.

I must have been in almost every club, bar and dive in Soho and the West End, before I found him.

Laura could not remember where his flat was, and I doubted if it was his for that matter. There were many Carlisles in the London telephone directory, but I had a feeling I would be wasting a lot of time on that score, as he would not plaster his name and address about if he was in the blackmail racket. Blackmailers don't sleep well at nights.

I had spread the word around to a few of my contacts, that it would be worth a few pounds, to whoever let me know where to find Carlisle.

It was 9 p.m. when I received a telephone call from Big Sam, that Carlisle was in a bar in Dean Street, Soho.

Big Sam was an American Negro, who had been a fairly good pro. heavyweight boxer in his day. I had used him a few times when I needed some additional muscle on a job. I told Sam I would be there in half an hour. If Carlisle left—then tail him and ring me back at the bar.

I made it in twenty five minutes.

Sam was tucked in the corner of the bar. His heavy face broke into a grin when I shouldered my way through the crowd towards him.

I slipped him a five pound note and he nodded his head towards the other end of the bar.

I ordered a large scotch and one for Sam.

It was one of those bars that had

a mixed colourful clientele. Call girls, lesbians and a sprinkling of small time, out of work actors.

Everything that the tourists called atmosphere. It reeked of it.

I picked up my drink and casually glanced up the bar. There was no mistaking Laura's description of him.

He was about my height, just under six foot, with dark hair slicked back. His face was pale with not much character in it. On his top lip he had a pencil line black moustache. He was wearing a dark suit, white shirt, spotted bow tie and a black lightweight overcoat. Around his neck he had loosely draped a white silk scarf. He looked like a second-rate gigilo.

I stuck a cigar in my mouth and made several attempts to light it with my Ronson lighter, which had a miniature camera built into it. By now I had already taken four shots of Carlisle and the people around him.

I picked up my glass and moved through the crowd, to where Carlisle was.

He looked half drunk and was arguing with two attractive girls of about twenty years of age and two well dressed middle-aged men.

I worked my lighter again and got some good close ups of the group.

As I pushed past them to the bar, I deliberately bumped into Carlisle, spilling his drink.

He staggered back and looked annoyed.

I apologised and insisted that I buy him and his friends a drink.

They all asked for a large gin. I passed them their drinks and as Carlisle took his, he said.

"Damned decent of you old man."

He had one of those accents that seemed forced.

They were arguing about going on to some party. The girls' wanted a supper and some bright lights first. The two middle aged men looked as if they wanted to get the girls into bed. And quick.

One of the girls began to talk to me.

She was a tall, good looking blonde, with hair down to her shoulders. She was wearing a sleeveless white polka dot jersey that emphasized her more than ample breasts, skin tight white toreador pants and white high heeled boots.

Hanging from her ears were a pair of those golden ear rings that are about four inches across. I could feel my toes begin to waggle —always a good sign.

"You want to come to a party, big boy?" she said, in a phoney American accent.

"With you—yes," I grinned.

She looked at Carlisle.

"Lenny, I want big boy here to come to the party."

Carlisle looked hard at me, then at the blonde.

"I mean it Lenny," the blonde said. "Or nix on the other performance."

Carlisle was studying me closely, so I pulled out my wallet, casually, letting them see a wad of notes and ordered another round of drinks. The other girl, who was a small brunette with short cropped hair, wearing a black leather outfit and black boots, joined in.

"Why not Lenny?" she giggled, as though at some secret thought. "It might be fun." She moved towards me.

"I'm Kinky," she said.

The blonde put her hand through my arm.

"That's not just her name—she really is. My name is Vicky."

"I'm Frank," I said and knocked my scotch back.

Carlisle was watching me like a stoat watching a rabbit.

"Are you in town for long?" he asked.

"Just for three days, then I'm back up north. While I'm here, I'm after a bit of fun and games," and I leered at the girls.

Carlisle jerked his head at me and went out to the gents room. I followed him. He shut the door then turned to face me.

"If you want some fun and games, I can fix it. But it will cost you."

"How much?" I said.

"Ten pounds. It's a private party with the whole works."

I pulled out my wallet and slipped him two five pound notes which he pushed into his wallet.

He opened the door and we walked back into the bar.

"All right, let's go," said Carlisle and made for the door.

The two middle aged men seemed undecided until Kinky turned to them.

"Come on darlings, last in bed is a sissy."

That decided them, they went like lambs to the slaughter.

Outside the bar, we stood in a group while Carlisle hailed a taxi.

Vicky had her arm through mine and she whispered.

"Have you a car?" I nodded.

"Yes, it's in the next street."

Just then a taxi pulled into the kerb. Carlisle opened the door, Kinky jumped in, eagerly followed by the two middle aged casanovas, then Carlisle got in. He sat there with his hand near the door.

"Come on, we haven't got all night," he said.

Vicky put one hand on the door.

"You go on, we will follow. I know the way," and she slammed the door in Carlisle's face.

As the taxi moved away from the kerb, Vicky burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" I said.

"I was hoping I'd trapped his hand in the door," she answered.

I looked at her carefully.

Although she had laughed, I had a feeling that she really had wanted to trap Carlisle's hand.

With an attitude to Carlisle like that, it would be a good idea to keep on good terms with the blonde.

We got into my car, a blue Citreon. Vicky told me to drive to Epsom, the house we were going to was near the race track. I passed the taxi on the outskirts of London and as we crossed the deserted unlit road across the Epsom Downs, Vicky, who up to then had been leaning against me, quitely smoking a cigarette, opened her window, threw out her cigarette and said.

"Pull off the road, Frank. Somewhere quiet.

I rolled the car off the road onto a large stretch of grass beneath some big trees, cut the engine and switched off the lights.

She leaned towards me, twisted round and fell back across my knees, her arms were around my neck, pulling me down towards her.

She was quite an operator, so I let her operate, giving her as much co-operation as I could, considering we were in a car.

One thing I knew for sure. Her physical attractions were all her own and she knew how to use them.

It was about an hour later when we arrived at the house where the party was being held.

It was a large house, set in its own grounds and up the driveway were parked about twenty cars.

I had been quietly pumping Vicky for information about Carlisle.

She told me he had a flat in Maida Vale, that she had been to parties with him—but that was all. I decided to park the car in a nearby lane.

As we walked up to the house, she held my hand tightly.

Please promise you won't leave me alone in there," she said.

I shrugged my shoulders. I wanted to do some snooping around, this was probably one of the same kind of parties at which Laura had been set up for blackmail.

"I won't leave you Vicky," I said, as we walked into the house.

There was quite a crowd.

Most of them were well dressed. Some of the women were middle aged, but there were quite a few young women too. Most of the men were getting on a bit, but I noticed three tough looking characters in tuxedos moving amongst the crowd. They would be the bouncers, the boys who worked you over if you complained that someone had removed your wallet while you were enjoying yourself.

We mingled with the crowd. I lifted two glasses of champagne from a waiter's tray and Vicky and I raised our glasses to each other.

She puckered her lips to me, I grinned back at her. I wondered what she would have done if she had known I was a private eye,

getting ready to smash the organization she was working for.

I put a cigar in my mouth and casually worked my lighter several times, so that I had some good shots of the trio of tough guys, for future reference.

There was no sign of Carlisle, but I noticed Kinky and one of her boy friends. There was a large staircase at the far side of the large hall and I saw Carlisle appear at the top and begin to walk down.

His eyes looked glassy and his pupils were bulging. Whatever dope he had taken was certainly taking effect.

He strutted over to Kinky and said something to her, jerking his head towards the staircase. Kinky nodded to him and holding her middle aged boy friend by the hand, led him upstairs.

As Carlisle reached us, Vicky blurted out.

"Not to-night."

He looked as though he could not believe his ears.

"Get up," he snapped.

"I told you, not to-night," Vicky stammered out.

The girl looked scared stiff.

Carlisle looked at her for a few seconds, a muscle in his face began to twitch. Suddenly he swung his right hand to hit her in the face. But he never made it.

I grabbed his outstretched arm, pulled him off balance towards me and punched him right where his navel was.

His mouth opened wide and he collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Two of the bouncers noticed him and went to lift him to his feet. Carlisle managed to nod his head in my direction and they both had a good hard look at me. Vicky grabbed my arm.

"Oh! Frank, I'm frightened. Let's go before they come and beat you up."

I patted her arm.

"The fun is only just beginning sweetheart."

She looked at me as though I was mad.

The third tough guy had gone up the staircase and rang a bell.

The people all seemed to know what it meant and began to hurry up the staircase. They all looked flushed and excited. I took hold of Vicky's arm and half pushed her up the stairs.

"Come on, there is safety in numbers," I said.

At the top of the staircase was a long corridor with several doors leading off.

All the people were trooping through the open door at the end of the corridor.

When we walked in, I saw it was set out like a miniature cinema with rows of tip up seats and at the far end of the room, a large screen. The people were fighting for the seats near the front.

I sat down on an end seat at the left side, with Vicky beside me.

After a few minutes the lights

dimmed and the screen began to flicker.

Some woman gave out a harsh cackle of laughter, then I saw a figure appear on the screen. It was Kinky, the little brunette and she was wearing only a black bra and panties and her black boots. Then I realized it was close circuit television we were watching.

Kinky was dancing about in what appeared to be a well furnished bedroom. Music was playing, "These boots were made for walking."

Then into vision, came the middle aged casanova. He had his jacket off and lunged at the girl, but she dodged him and laughed at the screen.

So that is what it was. A sex show for people with jaded appetites.

The music changed to a bossa-nova and Kinky began to gyrate her lovely little body in front of us all.

The man with her, obviously had no idea he was being watched by about fifty people, or he would never have acted as he did next.

He ripped off all his clothes, except for his socks and chased the girl around the room.

The crowd was roaring and cheering at his antics when I felt a hand like iron, on my left shoulder.

I looked up, it was one of the bouncers.

"Out chum, the show's over for you," he growled.

I rose slowly to my feet and into the aisle with my back to him.

On the screen the middle aged man had, at last, caught the girl and had ripped off her bra.

The crowd bayed like animals as he threw her on the bed and dived on top of her. For a second the bouncer's attention was on the screen ; and not on me. I swung back my left elbow and felt it hit him in his face.

As I turned, his hands flew up to his damaged face and I kicked him as hard as I could in the stomach.

As he fell forward, I thumped him on the side of his neck with my right fist, but he was past caring.

A middle aged woman near Vicky screamed out, but it was drowned by the noise of the crowd.

I grabbed Vicky's hand.

"Come on, we're leaving," and ran for the door, only to be met by another of the bouncers. He was a hard looking character, about six foot two inches tall and built like a barn.

He hit me on the jaw and I went sprawling, I felt his foot hit me in the side. I grabbed his leg and pulled him off balance on top of me. I tried to knee him, but he was too clever for that.

His hands were around my neck and I grabbed one of his ears in one hand and with the palm of my other hand against his nose, tried to screw his head off. I was

slowly blacking out when I felt him go limp. I pushed him away and looked up. There was Vicky with one of her boots swinging in her right hand. She had slugged him on the back of his head. She helped me to my feet. I rubbed my throat where the goon had been choking me.

"Thanks Vicky," I managed to whisper, my voice had nearly gone.

The old bird who had seen my first fight was now having hysterics, but as Kinky had struggled free and was being chased again, the crowd was too preoccupied to bother about men having their heads knocked off. I held Vicky while she put on her boot again, then we stepped into the passageway.

No one was waiting to slug me and at the bottom of the staircase were some champagne bottles.

I opened one and poured it down my aching throat, I needed it.

There was a telephone on a table near the door. I dialed the police and told them to send a couple of squad cars round as there was a vice party in progress and we were running out of men. I was sure they'd oblige.

We ran down the drive and got into my car.

We were at the next road junction when a police car shot past us going in the direction of Carlisle's party. With a bit of luck, Carlisle would spend the night being cross-examined by the Vice Squad.

Chapter 3

On the way back to London, Vicky was strangely quiet. I asked her where she lived and she said Chelsea.

Suddenly, she grabbed my arm, "Are you a copper?"

I grinned in the darkness.

"What makes you think that?"

"Well you are no business executive, or commercial traveller—not the way you laid out that gorilla back there. I've seen him half kill men bigger than you!"

"Would it make any difference if I was a copper?" I asked her. I could feel her staring at me.

"If you are a copper, then my life won't be worth that," and she flicked her finger and thumb.

I knew what she meant. The underworld have their own way of dealing with people who assist the police.

A razor across a girl's face and she is a walking warning to anyone else who is tempted to talk.

I had only known this girl a few hours, but I felt responsible for her.

"You had better stay at my flat until all this cools down, I'll see you come to no harm."

"So you are a copper," she spat out at me.

"I'm a private investigator. Carlisle was blackmailing my client—and possibly many others."

"Let me out," she demanded.

I carried on talking. "You are in this too deep Vicky, to just

walk off, stay with me, I'll protect you—"

She started crying, "To think I have to fall for a copper—what a laugh."

I said no more, but drove fast for my flat in south London.

I took her upstairs, gave her a large brandy, showed her where the spare bedroom was, got Carlisle's address from her and told her to lock the door after I left.

"Where are you going, Frank?" she whispered.

"I'm going to Carlisle's place. While he is out, I'm going to look for some photographs."

She nodded her head pitifully.

"He did the same to me when I was eighteen—threatened to send them to my parents unless—" then her voice faltered.

"Unless what?" I growled.

"Unless I did what he wanted."

"What was that?"

She sighed deeply and took a long swig on her drink.

"I had to attract men to his filthy parties, at first that was all, then he made me—" her voice faltered again.

"Made you do what?" I insisted.

"He made me run about with those men, sometimes he made Kinky and I—" then she broke down sobbing.

I gave her another large brandy, waited a second outside while she locked the door, then walked out to my car.

It was about 2.30 a.m. when I found Carlisle's address. The place was a large old house converted into flats. At the entrance were a row of name plates. His was flat 'D', on the top floor.

I walked quietly up the stairs and stopped outside his door. I listened carefully, but there was no sound. The lock was a Yale type, which took me about five minutes to open. I put my hand on the door and slowly pushed it open.

The room was in darkness, so I switched on a small torch I had with me.

The small beam moved around the room, picking out the furniture. The place appeared well furnished and expensive, nothing like the outside appearance. I moved to the window and pulled the curtains shut, then groped my way back to the door to switch on the light. My hand found the switch, then I heard a sound. I stopped breathing —but someone else did not.

I switched my torch out and dived to one side, but it was too late. Something hard smashed into my face, then I felt a foot hit me in the ribs. I tried to grab it, but something hit me on the base of my skull and as the sickening pain flashed through my head, there were more savage blows and I knew no more—only blackness, pain, the sound of a slamming door and running feet down the stairs outside. I struggled desperately to remain conscious, but finally with relief I passed out.

Chapter 4

It was a thousand years later when I opened my eyes. My head felt as though a fire was burning inside it and all I could do for a few minutes was to lie there, trying to move my arms and legs.

They all moved, so nothing was broken, except my head. I crawled on my hands and knees towards the wall and felt for the door. Hold on McGrath, all you have to do is stand up and switch on the light.

I tried, but my head wanted to stay down on the floor and I collapsed in a heap again. My face seemed wet and sticky, my nose felt out of shape and my head was thumping like a steam hammer. Other than that, I was O.K.

I reached for the door knob and turned it. I used it to help myself to my feet and was just about standing, when I lost my balance, the door knob still clutched in my hand.

As I slumped down again, the door swung open, letting in a stream of light from the landing outside.

I breathed in deeply through my aching nose, then climbed to my feet and switched on the light.

The light hurt my eyes, but I was almost past caring.

For fifty pounds a week, I get half strangled twice and my head beat in, all I needed was for someone to steal my car and my cup of happiness would be full.

From the large mirror on the wall, I caught sight of myself. I'd been hit before, but whoever did this, meant it to stick. I looked as though I was wearing a Hall'owe'en mask.

There was an open door leading to possibly a bedroom. I poked my head inside, switched on the light and nearly jumped a mile.

Someone was sitting on a straight chair. I coughed, but there was no movement, no sound, from my companion.

It looked like a man, but he had something over his head—something like a transparent plastic bag.

I moved slowly round him, until I was facing him. I'd seen him before, the last time at a sex party. I'd hit him that time, but there was no need to now. He was as dead as one of my old cheque books.

He was tied to the chair, with a broom handle fixed behind his head.

His neck was tied to the broom handle, so that the head was held erect, then they must have put the plastic bag over his head.

All this time, Carlisle would be watching his murderer, slowly killing him.

As the oxygen in the bag was used up, Carlisle would struggle until, bit by bit, he died, while his murderer sat watching him.

I staggered out of the bedroom, found the bathroom, switched on the light and kept washing my face and head in cold water.

I washed my mouth out—there was a trail of blood everywhere I went. I washed my face again, then gingerly patted it dry with a towel.

With a shaking hand, I lifted the telephone receiver and dialed the police. I gave the address—told them I had found a dead man. My name? McGrath. Yes, I would wait until the police called. I hung up. In my condition I would hardly get down the stairs.

I shut the outer door and walked across to the bedroom. I touched Carlisle's hand, then moved his arm. Rigor mortis had not set in, so his murder was probably being committed while I was trying to open the door. The murderer must have heard me, if he took the plastic bag off Carlisle's head, Carlisle would have shouted out, so the murderer had to leave it on and wait for me to walk in. I went back into the living room. There was a well stocked cocktail cabinet. I poured myself a very large scotch and gulped it down. I started to ponder over Carlisle's murder. People kill other people with guns, knives, poisons, even pushing them off cliffs—but I had never heard of a murder by plastic bag. Why? Besides being sadistic, the killer may have been after information.

The negatives of the blackmail photographs Carlisle had taken were valuable to someone he was blackmailing, or to someone who wanted to take over the lucrative business of blackmail.

What a way to die, with a plastic bag over your head. Dying by degrees, the killer waiting for Carlisle to nod his head to admit he was licked, then the killer would take off the plastic bag, while Carlisle gasped out where the negatives were.

But he never had a chance. McGrath, the private eye called. Result. One man suffocated and a private eye beaten to a pulp. I raised my head back to drain the last of the scotch and saw a dark shadowy object in the large crystal chandelier. It seemed too dark for dust, so I grabbed a chair, placed it underneath the light, stood on the chair and put my hand carefully into the chandelier.

The object was a safe deposit key.

Attached to the key was a small metal label with the words, "Victoria Station" imprinted on it.

I glanced at my wrist watch, it was just three forty five, so I had been unconscious almost an hour.

If I moved fast, I could be at Victoria in half an hour.

The police would not like it, but by the time they had taken photographs, finger prints and questioned everyone in the building, it may be too late to catch the killer.

Pushing the key into my jacket pocket, I walked out of the flat, quietly closing the door behind me. I went slowly down the stairs, my head swimming about a yard ahead of me.

I made the street O.K., breathed

the early morning air into my lungs and walked slowly towards my car.

I had a feeling that what I was going to find at Victoria Station would blow the lid off the whole mixed up case.

I got into my car and drove away.

Victoria Station at four in the morning is not the nicest place in the world. The few people waiting for trains were walking about like zombies, trying to keep the cold out of their limbs.

My left eye was closing up. It felt like a hard boiled duck egg had taken its place.

I found the rows of metal safety deposit boxes and took Carlisle's key out of my pocket. The number on it was seventeen. I slid the key in the lock of box number seventeen and opened the small door.

Inside was a metal box about twelve inches by eight inches wide and another key. The key was number eighteen. So I opened box number eighteen, like someone on a television treasure trove show. Inside box number eighteen was another metal box similar to the one in box seventeen. I lifted out both boxes, laid them on the ground, locked the metal doors, slipped the keys into my pocket and carried the two boxes back to my car.

I decided to take them back to my flat and see what the contents were.

One man had died because he had the key to box seventeen.

Now I had the two metal boxes, plus a beaten face.

From now on in, it was someone else's turn.

Chapter 5

By the time I reached my flat and parked the car, my left eye was completely closed, so that I had to squint through my right one. I carried the boxes up to my flat then tried to open the door.

It would not budge, then I remembered that Vicky had locked it.

So I kept ringing the bell and banging on the door.

After five minutes I heard Vicky cry out in a frightened voice.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, McGrath. Come on, open up."

I heard the bolt go and the door opened.

When she saw me, her hands flew to her mouth and she stepped back in shock. I strode past her.

"Good God, Frank, what has happened to you?" she gasped out.

"Walked into a brick wall," I answered.

I put the two metal boxes on the table and asked Vicky to make some hot black coffee.

"Oh! your poor face, Frank, let me get a doctor," she said.

"Never mind the doctor, make me that coffee," I growled.

The boxes had clasps with small padlocks on them.

I grabbed the solid iron poker from the fireplace and tried to prise

open the lock. It would not budge, so I hit it as hard as I could with the poker. The box flew across the room, but the lid was open.

I did the same with the other one and was emptying the contents on to the table, as Vicky came back into the room carrying two mugs of coffee.

As I drank the hot coffee, my stomach began to settle. My ribs still ached where the killer's foot had hit me, but if I stopped now, I would never start again.

Vicky sipped her coffee, then said.

"What's that you have there?"

The table was strewn with small foolscap envelopes. Envelopes very much like the one Laura, my client, had shown me in my office. An envelope which had contained obscene photographs.

I began to open some. Each one had a name and address on and each envelope contained three or four photographs and a negative.

This was the blackmail business, lock, stock and barrel!

Some of the names I recognized. Society people and a few public figures. I only had to glance at the photographs to see why the people concerned would rather pay blackmail than have their activities flashed around.

I finished my coffee and looked up at Vicky. She was biting her lower lip.

"What is your second name, Vicky?"

"Williams," she whispered. "Veronica Williams."

I rummaged about through the envelopes and found an envelope with her name on. I passed it to her unopened.

"There you are, burn them and you have nothing else to fear. Carlisle is dead and very shortly, the rest of the people concerned will be finished too."

She was staring at the envelope.

"Look inside so that you know it is yours."

My lighter flicked into life as she glanced at the photographs of herself. I pushed my hand forward, the butane gas lighter flame licked at the edge of the envelope, then slowly the hungry flame devoured the envelope and its foul contents.

She dropped the blackened envelope on to the floor, I scooped it up on to a magazine, carried it into the bathroom and flushed the charred remains away.

"Make me another coffee, Veronica," I said with a smile, "and cheer up, your nightmare is over."

She moved towards me, kissed me on the lips—looked at me for a few seconds, kissed me once more, then ran out of the room.

I began to go through the envelopes and found what I was looking for. A picture of a young man and an attractive girl holding hands and smiling at the camera. Nothing obscene, just a photograph of a young couple on the beach.

But in the same envelope was an-

other photograph of the same girl, with an older man, at somewhere that looked like the south of France.

Vicky passed me another coffee.

I laced it with whiskey and drank it down.

I went to the bureau and took out my .38 Smith and Wesson and checked to see it was loaded.

"Can you drive?" I asked Vicky.

She nodded her head.

"Good, I want you to drive me somewhere."

"Where?" she said.

"Never mind where—I'll tell you the directions as we go along."

I scooped up all the envelopes into the boxes, stuck the .38 into my waistband, picked up the two boxes and made for the door.

The case was coming to an end, but if I was not careful, I might end up a very dead detective.

Chapter 6

Dawn was breaking as we approached our destination. I was dead tired, but if I went to sleep, I would have been asleep for hours, so I sat there beside Vicky, smoking a cigar.

I told her to stop outside the entrance, opened the car door and stepped out into the cold morning air.

"Find a telephone and 'phone the cops. Tell them I'm going in there," I nodded my head at the house, "and don't forget to tell them that I am going after the murderer of a man in Maida Vale early this morning."

I felt the butt of the .38 with my right hand, put the two metal boxes under my left arm and with a brief wave, began the long walk up the gravel driveway.

I had walked about twenty strides when I heard the Citreon engine start up and Vicky drive away.

I smiled a grim smile and carried on walking, past the silver birch trees and the large lawn, gleaming with early morning dew.

The birds were just waking up and beginning to sing as I reached the front door and pressed my thumb on the bell. I kept it there. McGrath was up, the birds were up, why shouldn't everyone else be up?

After a while, I heard bolts being drawn and the door opened about six inches and a face peered out.

It was Mrs. Laura Barnard, my client.

She tried to shut the door, but I stuck my foot in the gap and pushed the door open.

All she was wearing was a lemon coloured chiffon neglige, which kept no secrets from me.

"What on earth do you want?" she said.

"I want to talk to you" and walked past her into the lounge, where she had taken me the first day we had met.

She followed me into the room.

"Have you been in a fight again?" she said.

I blew some cigar smoke in her direction. She waved a hand in front of her to disperse it.

"Can you come back at a more convenient hour, say—

"No—I want to speak to you now" I snapped and I placed the two boxes on the table.

"Are you drunk?" she said in an icy voice.

I shook my head.

"No—I'm stone sober—and I've also got your backmail photographs" and I patted the two metal boxes with one hand.

Her eyes fastened on the boxes and she moved towards them, then stopped. An eager smile came on her face and she moved close to me.

"You have the photographs! where did you get them?"

I looked at her with my one good eye.

"I got them from Carlisle."

Her smile faded.

"How did you manage to get them from him? Did you pay him for them?"

My cigar had gone out, so I relit it with my lighter. I drew heavily on the cigar, blew the smoke out then said.

"There was no need to pay him. He was dead, and you know it!"

"You must be out of your mind! Leave me the photographs and I will give you a cheque."

She walked towards a bureau and scribbled in a cheque book.

"I'm not out of my mind, and you are not out of the hangman's noose! I said quietly.

She turned slowly, her face a grim mask.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know quite well what I mean. Carlisle is dead, but what he left behind will hang his murderer," I answered.

She stood there, her gorgeous figure fully revealed through her chiffon negligee. She moved towards me until our bodies were touching. Then she stroked one finger nail along my cheek.

"But darling, I hired you to stop me being blackmailed, you saw the pictures yourself."

"What you showed me were photographs of you in bed with several different men. *They* were the ones who were being blackmailed. Not you!

She stopped stroking my cheek and moved back two steps.

"But I explained. Carlisle threatened to show them to my husband," she said in her coaxing and husky voice.

"Not your real husband, your bigamous one." I said in a loud voice.

She moved close to me and placed her arms around my neck and held me tight. "Don't you like me Frank," she whispered, "don't you like my body?" and she pressed herself against me.

I carried on talking.

"You were married before you

met Barnard. You and Carlisle and your legal husband operated the racket of getting wealthy and influential men in bed with you, then blackmailed them."

She kissed me on the mouth, her lips were soft and inviting, then her tongue darted into my mouth. I pushed my head back away from her.

"You met someone with stacks of money, he proposed to you and you accepted. It was better than blackmail. An easy life with plenty of dough, but Carlisle would not let you off the hook."

"He threatened to tell Barnard of your previous marriage, the husband who was very much alive, so you wanted Carlisle out of the way. That's where I came in."

The door opened behind me and a man's deep voice said.

"Move away from her and get your hands in the air."

I put my hands up and moved slowly away from the woman and turned round. It was Charles, the chauffeur, Laura's legal husband and he had a Colt .45 in his right hand. He was wearing a dressing gown over his pyjamas.

He glared at Laura. "I told you it was a mistake to get him involved."

He sneered at me. "Not that it is going to do either of you any good."

The woman was between us on one side. There was a puzzled expression on her face.

"What do you mean darling?" She moved towards him.

He pointed the gun at her.

"Stay where you are. I've had enough of you. You married me, but slept around with every man in sight."

She moved towards him, but the gun pointed at her stomach and she stood still.

"Get next to your private detective, Go on—move!" he snarled.

Laura moved alongside me and he went on talking again.

"Even when I found out about your rotten blackmail racket, I forgave you. Then you met that rich bastard, Barnard and married him."

He stared at me. His eyes were queer and his mouth was drooling. He was as nutty as a fruit cake.

"You know what she did? She hired me as her chauffeur. Me—her husband!"

He spat on the carpet at her feet. "She treated me like dirt, rubbed my nose in it."

His trigger finger was white, he was going to fire the .45 at her.

"Why didn't you leave her?" I said.

He looked at me with a face twisted with hate.

"Leave her—leave her? Oh! I've left her before and crawled back to her. I could not live without her. Then I heard her asking you to kill Carlisle, the next thing, she would have been in bed with you—so I killed Carlisle myself. But you know what? She would not believe me. She laughed in my face and said I was lying."

I edged away from Laura, my cigar butt was between my finger and thumb. I kept edging away from her as I began talking.

"I believe you killed Carlisle. You killed him with a plastic bag over his head, trying to make him confess where the blackmail photographs were. You drove him away from that party last night, before the cops came." His gun turned towards me as I continued talking. "You also gave me a beating."

He gave a half twisted smile.

"Yeah—that was some beating wasn't it?"

He looked at Laura. "You know what I did? I hit him with the gun barrel like this—" and he made a swing at an imaginary head, as I flicked my lit cigar butt at his face.

It hit him on the bridge of his nose in a burst of tiny sparks.

My right hand went for my .38 and as it came up to fire, he beat me to it, But he was not firing at me. He was firing at the gorgeous redhead. His wife. The first bullet hit her in the stomach, the second in the chest.

He never squeezed the trigger again, because he was dead, I had shot him right between the eyes.

She only lived a few minutes after him. There was nothing I could do, except watch her die.

I looked at the cheque Laura had made out for me before she died. It was for one thousand pounds. She must have thought I had accepted her offer and killed Carlisle, just like she asked me to.

I lit the cheque with my lighter and watched it burn to nothing, then walked to the front door, just as the police car screeched to a halt outside.

They gave me a rough time.

With three corpses and only McGrath to link them together, I had to talk fast. I showed them the boxes of photographs.

I explained about the blackmail racket, how Carlisle involved people—men and women, then bled them white.

I told them I would let them have the negatives out of the miniature camera in my cigarette lighter, so they could pick up the hoodlums Carlisle employed.

Before I handed the negatives over, I was going to destroy any that showed Vickey. Without her I would have been nowhere, except floating down the river Thames.

They were about two hours before they let me go.

I walked out of the large house with the three car garage, down the long gravel drive, past the wide green lawn, past the silver birch trees for the last time.

The very last time.

There was damned little he wouldn't do if enough money was involved. And this deal was worth one hundred and fifty grand.

THE car slowed, keeping pace with my footsteps on the sidewalk. I glanced over, but the streets were too dark for me to see the driver. All I could tell was that the car was a this-year's Chevy and the driver was a man, wearing a dark coat.

And then—call it instinct, I don't know. I only know my muscles tensed and I landed on my belly, the pavement cold and damp against my face in the pre-dawn mist from

Steve Black! Goddamned sonofabitch! He must have been out of his mind to go this far.

Walkup slum buildings stood on both sides of the warehouse, looking tired and old in the early morning semi-darkness. The bar on the corner was closed.

Then I saw it—about four doors down. A church. Catholic, I figured. The cross on top was lit and light came through some of the stained-glass windows.

A NOVELETTE

BY

ORT LOUIS

the East River a couple blocks away.

The gun had a silencer—the loudest sound came as a chip flew out of the wall right behind where my head had been seconds ago.

I rolled back—fast, into the shadowed doorway of the nearest building, an old warehouse, but I might have saved myself the trouble.

The car was gone.

I got to my feet, shaking, numb. Like when I was in the army. My mind knew it was real, but the rest of me kept yelling it was only a bad dream. Yeah, the car was gone—

I checked both sides of the street, then made a run for it.

The door was heavy—but unlocked!

I walked in. Two other guys—they looked like dockworkers, sat in the back of the sanctuary. Maybe they were early for some kind of early service. It was about five a.m. Or maybe they'd just come in because it was open and the streets outside were damp.

I stood by the door. I'm not Catholic—or anything else, for that matter, and I didn't quite know what to do. I looked for a side exit. No luck.

Again, I glanced into the sanctuary, and this time I saw a priest. I guess he was in his mid thirties, like me. His face was far from what I might have expected—he looked like a marine out of uniform.

Our eyes met and I stepped back where he couldn't see me. He probably figured I was drunk—my tie was loose, my eyes were red and I needed a shave. My hair's black, so missing the razor even one day can make me look like it's been a week.

Next thing I knew, he walked into the lobby and faced me. "What's the trouble," he asked quietly.

"I—er—" Oh yeah, think of something believable, boy—fast.

His eyes met mine and held. Sharp. Nothing country parish about this guy—and I knew right away *he* knew I wasn't drunk. "Cops after you?"

"No."

"Let's talk about it."

It was an order—come clean or get out. And getting out, at that particular moment, did not appeal to me.

So I followed him—through a side door near the altar, down a hall and into a medium-sized room with a chair, a desk and a couch. The carpet was thick but badly worn and frayed at the edges. A crucifix with a figure of Jesus was posted above the desk, on the wall. He sat behind the desk, leaned back—and watched me. "You're not Catholic, are you?"

"No."

He nodded. "My name's Jim Knight."

I hesitated, then decided I liked him. "Linc Keller."

"Why do the cops want you?"

"They don't."

He waited.

And that was when—because of him, I guess, I thought of the Catholic church! How big, how powerful—*I* sure wouldn't want to fight with it. "I want to make a will," I answered finally. "I own some property. I want to leave it to the church."

"You *what?*"

"It's worth about $30,000—and within the forseeable future, it'll probably be worth about five times as much. But there's a string. You're not to sell it. I'll will it to the church with the provision that it never be sold—that part's got to be air tight. Can you get a lawyer down here?"

"It's a little early—"

"It's a lot of money."

He hesitated, then lifted the phone receiver.

"Okay if I smoke?"

He pulled an ashtray from his desk drawer and set it in front of me.

I lit up, sat back and stretched my legs.

Steve Black! Until yesterday morning, he was my boss—Steve Black, Real Estate. My $30,000 rat-infested apartment building was one of eight comprising a corner section where the big luxury devel-

opers had moved in on just about every other corner. This section, in the lingo of the real estate boys, was on the "up grade". Steve was a sharp sonofabitch who'd been trying for three years to get control of this particular corner at a fat commission and plenty more under the table from a large developer with dreams of making millions by tearing down what was already there and replacing it with a marble-foyer luxury-rent deal. All of it, of course, was strictly on the hush hush. If word got out, prices would skyrocket.

There'd been one problem. Number 311 wouldn't sell. It was owned by a man in his early seventies with three kids, now in their late twenties, early thirties—a son and two daughters. The old guy was nuts. His wife ran off or disappeared about twenty years ago, this was the building where they lived when they were first married—and that was why he couldn't sell it. He couldn't bare to see it torn down.

Last month, he had a stroke. He'd been a real pack rat with the money, and none of the kids knew where it was buried. All they knew of was one small bank account and the house. The house they knew about because his oldest daughter —thick glasses, overweight, unmarried—managed it for him with full power of attorney.

In any case, seemed he'd had no insurance, so when the hospital bills mounted and he was still unable to talk—to tell them where they could pick up a few thousand, the daughter finally decided to sell.

And I was sent to quietly buy it for Black's developers.

Only I bought it for myself instead. I bought it for me, yessir, good ole' Linc Keller, lookin' out for number one! Now Black or the developers could buy it from me —for $150,000. Hell, it wasn't as though they couldn't afford it. It's the principle, said Black. Black's principles were fascinating. It was okay to toss an eighty-year-old widow onto the street so his clients could tear down the building she'd lived in for forty years, but that he should get took by me the same way he got *his* start ten years ago—this was immoral.

I finished my cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray.

The priest hung up the phone and looked at me—his face curious, but no longer suspicious. "Okay. You've got your lawyer. He'll be here in about half an hour."

I nodded. "It's a nice building," I offered casually. "Four stories—walk up. The first floor was converted into a store about ten years ago. At the moment, it's vacant. Basement's full of stored furniture. Maybe you could use it for the church—that you're welcome to—now, I mean. If there's anything you can use, just haul it away." I gave him the address.

"You said you're not Catholic. Why give it to the church?"

"Does it matter?"

"No—I guess not. Not if you don't want it to."

To the strongest, I thought. Alexander the Great left his kingdom" "to the strongest". Linc Keller was willing his matchbox slum "to the strongest"—the Catholic church. Black might be able to get it from me—or my sister, who was my closest living relative, but he'd never succeed against an organization as large and rich and powerful as the Catholic church.

"Air tight," I repeated, "that the church will never sell it."

And two carbons, I thought. One for me and one to throw in Black's fat face as a life-insurance policy. If I'm dead, buddy, you'll *never* get your hands on it!

Half an hour later, I was doing the, "I, Lincoln John Keller, being of sound mind—" bit.

I shook hands with the priest when I left. He'd stopped pushing for answers, and I respected him for it.

I stepped onto the street and blinked at the bright morning sunlight. It felt like the beginnings of a hot, muggy day.

My apartment was on the ninth floor of an elevator building on Sixth Avenue in Greenwich Village. I went out around four a.m. last night—or this morning, after giving up on trying to sleep. I'd taken a cab to good old 311—ah, sentiment!

Now I took one back to the apartment, the carbons of the will folded neatly inside my jacket pocket.

The doorman gave me a disapproving look, so I gave him a go-to-hell grin and climbed onto the elevator.

I stepped off and did a double take.

A girl was sitting on the floor of the hall, leaning her head against the door to my apartment. She was gorgeous—about twenty-six or seven with shoulder-length red hair and the kind of body that fills my very best erotic daydreams. She was wearing sandals, gray slacks and a "V" neck blue jersey top with long sleeves, pushed up.

She rose to her feet and laid her hand against her back like she'd been sitting there a long time and was stiff. "Mr. Keller?"

CHAPTER TWO

I nodded.

"Jean Berkley."

It rang a bell. The old man who'd owned 311 was Howard Berkley. "You related to the old man—Howard?"

"I'm his daughter."

I smiled, remembering the fat girl with glasses who sold me the property. "You don't look like your sister."

She shrugged her shoulders, and what it did for her breasts made it hard to keep my eyes on her face. My thoughts must have showed, because her lips got tight. "May I

talk to you?" she began quietly, "I've been waiting a long time."

"Well, I'm in kind of a rush—" Like get over to Black's office and show him the will before that Chevy glides by again and maybe doesn't miss. I pulled out my keys and walked inside.

She was right behind me.

"I'll rush with you," she announced with a pleasantness I couldn't quite believe. "Wherever you're going, we can talk on the way."

I tried to keep my face straight. "Sounds like fun. I'm going to shave and take a shower."

"Congratulations. I'll wait in the livingroom."

I laughed. At least she could dish it out. "Can you cook?"

"Huh?"

"Kitchen's that way—" I nodded. "Two scrambled, toast and black coffee. Coffee's instant."

I walked into the bathroom, not knowing whether she'd do it.

I shaved, showered and got into a pair of slacks and a white shirt. It was a little after nine. Black would probably get into the office between nine-thirty and ten; there was time. I felt awake—almost as though I'd had a good night's sleep, but I knew part of it was keyed-up nerves from being shot at.

I walked into the kitchen. Breakfast for two was waiting. She was sitting next to the window, and the sun made little copper-gold highlights in her hair. Her only make-up was light pink lipstick, and I still think I would have turned around and looked at her twice on any street. I sat opposite her and took a deep swig on the coffee—strong, black and hot—the way I liked it. "How the hell can you be her sister?"

She ignored it. "The property you bought from her—will you sell it back to us?"

"I doubt it. Why?"

"Look, we'll pay you thirty-five thousand. You paid thirty—nine cash over mortgage. Thirty-five's a more than fair profit."

"I can do better. A lot better."

"Look, Mr. Keller—"

"Name's Linc."

"Okay—Linc. My father's practically recovered from the stroke. He can talk and move and it looks like he's going to be home in a few days."

I dug into the eggs. "Glad to hear it."

"Like hell you are," she snapped. "I'm sure you couldn't care less one way or the other."

I tried to keep my face straight. "Seemed like a polite thing to say. I'm a firm believer in courtesy."

"He wants that house," she continued, lips tight. "He almost had a relapse when he heard we'd sold it. Seems he had two bank accounts under other names with more than enough to cover the hospital bills. Mr. Keller, he's an old man. He's had two strokes within the last five years. To be perfectly

blunt, he's not going to live that much longer. Sell it back to me for thirty-five, and I'll even put it in writing that when he dies you can have it back for twenty."

"Honey, you're talking peanuts."

"Listen to me, damnit. About twenty years ago, my mother disappeared. Sure, seven years later, she was declared legally dead, but he's never accepted this. He still wears his wedding ring, for heaven's sake, still talks about how someday she'll come back to him. You know, that section with the house wasn't always a slum. They lived there when they were first married. The furniture they used is stored in the basement. He used to go over there and just stand in front of the place, then he'd come home and talk about her. His wedding ring is just like hers—gold with three small diamonds. He says he won't die until she comes back. They'll be buried together, wearing the rings.

"All right, Mr. Keller, he's crazy. The house—and a fair-sized fortune—they were all hers. If she'd run off with someone, she would at least have taken some of the money. What I mean is, somewhere, somehow, she's dead—but he *needs* to believe she's alive, and what keeps her alive—for him, is that house."

"You said something about a fortune. How high are you willing to go for the house?"

She shook her head. "He lost it—he was never much of a business man." Her smile was dry. "He says it wouldn't have happened if she'd been there to help him. Mr. Keller—Linc, they're tearing down that whole neighborhood. If you sell the house and they tear it down, it'll kill him."

"I'm sorry."

"Oh, stop." Her voice was sweetly sarcastic. "I can't stand to see a man cry."

"Then don't look. There's the door."

She stood up, back straight, breasts high, hands on her hips and my loins reacted to a sudden mental picture of her naked. Damnit, I didn't invite her.

"They all said you were a complete bastard," she began quietly. "I didn't believe it."

"Who?"

"Oh, first there was your boss, Mr. Black. My brother and I were trying to find you. Mr. Black seemed to think we wanted to cause you some kind of trouble. He was awfully helpful."

I grinned. "I can imagine."

"He told us your nearest relative was your sister. We thought she might know where you were, so we went to see her. She confirmed everything Mr. Black said and added to it. It was about a week ago. Where were you?"

I thought back and remembered. "As a matter of fact, I was shacked up with a girl on Riverside Drive."

The color in her face deepened.

I leaned back in the chair, brac-

ing it against the wall. "And speaking of sex, is that why you came instead of your sister? Just how far are you willing to go for dear old daddy?"

Her mouth fell open—then snapped shut. "I still don't believe it."

"No? Listen, Honey, I'll clue you in on some of the sad facts of life. There were five kids in our family. One died from malnutrition and two more died from diseases other kids get shots for—or at least decent hospital care once they've got them. I survived and my sister survived. She wrapped herself up in the Bible, and she made it. Yeah, if she were in my position, she'd sell you that house—hell, she'd probably *give* it to you—which is why she'd never *be* in my position. She'd never even be able to make the nine thousand down payment."

Her voice was dry. "Am I supposed to feel sorry for you?"

I grinned. "Yeah. Cry me a river."

She walked out, and I found myself staring at the way her buttocks moved in the slacks with each step. Maybe I'd see her again.

And maybe I needed a psychiatrist for caring.

I got the will out of my jacket pocket and headed for Black's office.

I stopped in the lobby to pick up my mail. The box was jammed, and I couldn't figure why. It was nowhere near election time nor was it the end of the month when all the bills come in.

I unlocked the box and pulled it out.

Even before I started reading, I knew what it was, and my stomach crawled.

Building violations!

Fire Department, Health Department, Building Department, Rent Commission. Black must have gone over that place with a fine-tooth comb. Cracked and peeling plaster and paint, doors not self-closing, vermin infestation, etc., *ad nauseum*.

I went back up to my apartment and slumped onto the couch. Hell, I should have expected it. Black and I had done the same thing to a couple of other landlords who'd refused to sell—it was the greatest little squeeze play in New York. With every violation on the books staring at a landlord, he could either lay out a small fortune in repairs, sell the property or go to jail. And if, like me, he didn't have a small fortune, selling was generally a more appealing alternative than jail.

I lit a cigarette. Hell, if I'd picked up my mail even yesterday, maybe nobody would have shot at me this morning. Yeah, if Black figured the violation squeeze had worked, that might have been the end of it.

Well, nice try, brother, but no sale!

Again, I thought of the girl.

Thirty-five thousand and a contract to sell it back to me for twenty when the old man died.

I grinned. Maybe—if she thought she had to, she might even be willing to peel off those slacks and play some parlor games.

Yeah—let the old man worry about the violations, and by the time I bought it back, they'd be cleared up.

Except that it meant sitting back and waiting—hoping he'd die, which somehow just didn't appeal to me.

Maybe I could bluff it.

Yeah, fat chance. Black didn't get his goddamned Cadillac, the penthouse and house in the country by being bluffed.

I stubbed out the cigarette and headed for Black's office.

The receptionist—a virginal little kid, about twenty, looked startled to see me. Well, hell—the day Black fired me, his usually well-modulated, well-oiled voice must have carried six blocks.

"Mr. Keller! Mr. Black said you might be in sometime this week, but—"

Yeah, I thought—crawling, no doubt, with the deed between my teeth. I nodded towards his office. Is he in?"

"Yes, but he said if you came, you were to wait an hour."

I grinned. "I'll tell him you told me."

I walked into his office.

CHAPTER THREE

He glanced up from his cluttered desk, surprised at first then obviously amused. His thick face was deeply tanned—week-end in the country, no doubt.

The heavy flesh of his jowels lifted slightly as the incongruously thin lips formed a half smile. "I've been expecting you, Linc."

"Yeah, so I heard. I just dropped in to say good bye. I'm planning to jump off the Empire State Building." I tossed the will on the desk in front of him.

He hesitated, then read it, black eyes wary. "What the hell is this supposed to mean?"

"I don't suppose there's any chance you were up to—well, anything—unusual? This morning—about five a.m.?"

"I was in bed—asleep."

"Yeah, with a dozen witnesses, no doubt. Tell me, what is the going rate on having somebody killed?"

He looked startled. Then—slowly, he shook his head. "Not me, pal. But if you find out who it was, let me know. I'll chip in on his expenses."

I parked on the side of his desk and touched the will. "Yeah?"

He picked it up then shook his head, again, letting out a low whistle. "The Catholic Church! You don't believe in taking chances."

I shrugged my shoulders and moved onto a chair—but I watched

him—tried to figure whether maybe he was telling the truth.

No, it was crazy to believe him. I'll admit there wasn't anybody I could think of, off hand, who might shed any tears if I weren't around, but Black was the only one with reason enough to go this far.

"Go to the cops?" he asked pleasantly.

I didn't answer and both of us knew why. He grinned. There were too many financial manipulations I'd just as soon not have the cops—for anybody else, pry into—and Black knew it.

He was still holding the will.

"That copy's for you," I announced pleasantly. "Have it framed—just so you don't forget it's around."

He grinned. "Well, now, I kind of thought you might want to talk about selling that particular piece of property."

I took it slow and easy. "Make me an offer."

"What you paid for it." His voice was all business. "Thirty thousand."

"Go to hell. The old man recovered and wants it back—*and* I get a contract to buy it again when he dies. Top a hundred thousand or you'll never see it again. Your contract with the developers that they deal only with you expires next year, you know. I'll wait it out. I'll wait until the property's mine again, then go directly to the developers—assuming they still want it. If they don't, I'll simply leave it with the old man's estate and walk away with seventy-thousand, clear profit."

"You're lying." He sounded matter-of-fact, but I could tell he wasn't quite sure. "You goddamned sonofabitch, you're lying!"

I grinned and shoved the phone towards him. "Call the daughter. I spoke with her about an hour ago. Jean."

"The daughter's name is Sandra."

"There are two of them. One, two." I held up two fingers. "Count 'em."

He lifted the receiver and dialled his secretary. "Get me Jean or Sandra Berkley."

Five minutes later, I was in a cold sweat and I could see the tension easing out of Black's face.

He hung up. The smile was benevolent. "Nice try, Linc. The kind of thing I might have tried when I was your age—which is why I didn't believe you. Did you really think I wouldn't check?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "Seemed worth a try."

"Well, now that that's out of the way, we can get down to business."

He sat back, comfortably, and lit a cigarette. "At least you were telling the truth about the old man. He's being released from the hospital this afternoon. Now—as for the money. I talked to Sandra. She says her sister offered you thirty-five. I'm offering forty. Both of us

know the nine thousand cash you paid for it was every cent you had and all you could borrow. You *can't* repair those violations—and you don't want to go to jail. Therefore, you have to sell—now. And you'll sell it to me, not the Berkleys, because even though you'd like to see my whole little project fall through, I'm offering you more money than they are."

"Nice thinking, Steve—very nice. Only one element you left out. You—or somebody you hired took a pot shot at me last night, and that was unkind, Steve, that was downright unfriendly. Therefore, I am going to sell that goddamned house back to the daughter. Not only that—at a tremendous loss of personal profit, I am going to make damn sure that deal *never* goes through."

I reached into my wallet and pulled out a five-dollar bill. "This, my mentor, is going to kill it. This will more than cover the cost of a newspaper ad, renting that goddamned store at some ridiculously low rent on a ten year lease. *Ten years,* brother. *Then* I'll sell it back to the girl."

I started for the door.

"Linc—"

I turned around. His face was scarlet, lips so thin they'd almost disappeared. "A hundred thousand."

"I'll compromise," I answered quietly. "A hundred and fifty. And soon. Before there's any more action on those violations."

He nodded, traces of a smile touching his lips. I didn't get it. Then he picked up the will. "You might as well take this with you. I mean, what's the purpose of a will regarding property you no longer own?"

My jaw muscles tightened—and my hands started to sweat. "Just don't miss," I answered evenly. "Just don't miss again, because if you do, I'll be back."

"Linc—" His voice was soft and his eyes met mine without hesitation. "You may never believe this, but I had no knowledge of anyone trying to kill you until you told me."

I looked at him for a long minute. Lying? Yeah.

I walked out.

The sun was high and the muggy heat felt good. It gave me a comfortable rationalization on why I was sweating.

I stopped in a drug store and had lunch, then I went to a bar, had a few drinks and watched some fight films.

It was around five when I got back to the apartment.

I stepped off the elevator with a peculiar feeling I'd played this scene before. Jean Berkley was sitting on the hall floor, leaning her beautiful head against the door to my apartment. This time she was wearing a white blouse and a full skirt—dark gray.

I took my time. "Maybe I should get you a bench or give you a key."

She stood up, straightening her skirt, and I don't think it was even consciously sexy. It was just her—every move she made—the way she held her head—the way her breasts moved when she took a deep breath.

I unlocked the door and she walked inside with me. She parked on the couch and kicked off her sandals. Her feet and legs were bare, and the effect was pleasant. Too pleasant.

"I don't suppose it would do any good," she began quietly, "If I asked you to reconsider my offer on the house."

My answer was completely honest, and it startled me. I'm still not sure *why* it was honest—maybe I just liked her. Or maybe it was getting to me—someone who cared as much about another human being as she seemed to care about the old man. "No. I have another buyer."

Slowly, she rose to her feet. Then, before I could duck, she stuck a disgustingly legal-looking paper in my belt. My first reactionwas to toss it back at her—but it was too late. The paper had physically touched me. I was served.

Slowly, I took it out of my belt and looked at her. "Okay—what is it?"

"An injunction," she answered calmly, "against your selling that house to anyone but Howard Berkley."

CHAPTER FOUR

"An *injunction?*"

I took a good look at it. Sure enough, that's what it was. I moved onto the couch, still holding it in my hands. "Oh, that's great. Lovely. Congratulations. What judge did you sleep with?"

"Nothing so colorful," she answered drily. "My father is contesting my sister's right to have sold it. Says he wasn't in his right mind when he gave her the power of attorney."

"That's ridiculous. How long has she had it? Five years? Ten?"

"That's not the point. After I left you this morning, I had a long talk with a lawyer. Since there's a question as to whether she was entitled to sell it, there's also a question as to whether you actually own it—and until that question is settled, you can't sell it. I understand these things can take years to straighten out."

I sat back and closed my eyes.

Her voice was tinged with hope and disbelief. "Don't tell me I've won!"

"I don't recall telling you anything."

One hundred and fifty thousand bucks!

Farewell.

C'est le guerre.

Black's developers would move onto greener corners, other projects. Then I figured, what the hell? Black still had control of the other

seven buildings around 311. If I could buy it back when the old man died, there still wouldn't be any reason why I couldn't do business with Black. Hell, even if Black didn't still want it, the other old buildings in that area were going down like tenpins. Property values were skyrocketing.

"Same terms as before?" I asked finally.

"Well—not quite."

My sister would not have approved of the stream of four-letter words that swam through my brain. She'd talked to Black! She knew I had thirty days to clear up those goddamned violations. "What do you mean, not quite?"

"The contract that you could buy it back. My father hit the roof. He made the three of us swear we'd never let it be torn down. He cried, like a little kid. He said that when she came back, she'd need that house to find us."

"Oh, for crissake," I exploded, "the guy is a raving nut. He's senile. Can't you give me the goddamned contract and not tell him?"

She stood tall and straight, incongruously dignified with her bare feet against the rug. "I don't know," she answered quietly.

"Well, suit yourself." I was bluffing. "No contract, no sale. I'll wait you out. Take me through your courts. I'll win, and you know it. And if I win while he's still alive, he'll see it torn down. You're going to find yourself hoping every day that he won't make it, honey, and you're going to feel pretty goddamned lousey."

She looked at me, curiously, for a long time. "Stand up," she said finally.

"Huh?"

"You heard me."

I hesitated, then stood up. "Yeah?"

"Now don't move. Hold perfectly still."

I waited.

She walked over to me and laid her hand against my cheek, gently, then she kissed me, full on the lips.

By the time I shook off the surprise and reached for her, she'd moved away, her face curiously impassive. "You are human," she announced quietly. "You are a member of the human race. Your body is warm, you actually breathe. I'd begun to wonder."

I let out a low whistle. *"Touche."*

She walked to the couch and slipped her feet into the sandals. "My brother and sister are also heirs to that property—you'd need their signatures as well as mine, and I don't know whether they'll agree. I'll get in touch with them, then call you."

She started for the door.

"Jean—don't go."

She turned around. Her face said she was waiting for some kind of explanation.

"Look, I—I mean, it's five thirty. You wouldn't get a seat on a subway or bus, and it's unlikely you

could get a cab. Wait half an hour—have a drink with me."

"There's an angle," she answered drily, "Let's hear it."

I moved back onto the couch and looked at her. "Okay. I want you. The re-sale contract—and you."

Her mouth fell open, then snapped shut. "You're out of your mind."

"Not at all. It's done every day. Show business. Politics, Why not real estate?"

She swung around and started for the door.

My voice followed her. "Walk out that door, the whole deal's off. I mean it. I'll see you in court."

She hesitated, her hand on the knob. Then—again, she faced me. This time, her cheeks were scarlet. "Is there anything—or anyone you don't use?"

"Come off it, Honey, who are you trying to kid? I never invited you to come here. You show up twice—first in a pair of nice tight fanny-fitting slacks, and this time with your bare legs advertising no girdle, no garter belt—no major obstructions whatsoever. And that you-are-human kiss. Oh, that was beautiful. Erotic as hell, and you didn't have to give an inch on how pure you were and what a bastard I was. So don't you talk to me about using people, okay? On that point, we're not really very different, except that I generally succeed—and in this case, at least, you didn't."

"It's not the same! You want money. I want what's rightfully mine."

"Honey, I'll clue you, that *money* is rightfully *mine*. I can't help it if you wound up in the middle—and if it's worth anything to you, I'm sorry. I'm really, genuinely sorry anybody had to be hurt."

She closed her eyes. "If you really mean that, the least you can do is let me go."

I hesitated, then stood up and turned away so I wouldn't be looking at her when I said it. "Okay. Go."

"This means the rest of it's still on? If the others do agree to the re-sale contract, you will sell it back to us?"

I nodded. "Now go on. Get out. But goddamnit, the next time you want to talk to me, call me up. Or—" The rest of it came out dry, "send your sister."

I waited for the sound of the door opening and closing. It didn't come. I turned around.

She was leaning against the wall—watching me, her face curious.

Then, slowly, her hand moved to the top button on her blouse. She opened it—then the next button, then the next. She peeled out of it and stood there—white lace slip over a white cotton bra. The skirt was next. She opened it, let it fall to the floor and took a step closer to me, leaving the skirt and sandals behind. Bare feet, bare legs and a white lace slip. The sun still came in through the venitian blinds, but

evening made it softer. Her eyes seemed even bluer, and the copper gold highlights I'd noticed in her hair this morning were now deep red.

I took my time. "Okay. Why?"

"Why not?" she answered quietly. "Who'd believe you? I'm divorced, Mr. Keller. I suppose I'm also somewhat of a snob. The men I've dated since the divorce were gentlemen, and that's the kind I intend to go on seeing and being seen with. But you're the kind I've always wanted. You're crude, physical, masculine. You might have been a construction worker or a truck driver. Your shoulders are broad, your hips are narrow, you're tall and your hands have probably been on a lot of women. Your face isn't handsome, but it's male. You're male animal, Mr. Keller, and I want it. I've always wanted it, even while I was telling myself it wasn't true and marrying that very nice young man who left me so miserable in bed I finally gave up and divorced him."

She yanked the slip over her head, then stood there, holding the white lace material against her thigh, back straight, breasts high. Her underpants were white, transparent enough that the shadowed outline underneath was clearly visible.

Slowly, I moved onto the arm of the couch, watching her. "Go on." My voice was barely a whisper. "Take off the rest of it."

She smiled, face flushed, and moved her hands behind her back. Seconds later, she unhooked the bra then dropped it onto the floor. My breath caught in my throat. Hell, it wasn't the first time I'd seen a woman's breasts—even a beautiful woman, but never before anyone like Jean. She was perfect! Full, lush, nipples taut, a slight difference in skin tone showing she'd been in the sun—probably two or three times, with a strapless bathing suit.

She hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her panties, then laughed and stepped back against the wall. "No, it's not fair. I'll be naked, and you're completely dressed."

I took off my shirt. "Okay?"

Slowly, sensually, she walked over to me. She stood in front of me, reached down and opened my belt buckle.

I grabbed her, and both of us landed on the couch, the length of our bodies touching, then I was on top of her, my mouth covering her lips, her throat, her breasts, and suddenly her hands were yanking at my hair, a low moan turning to words as it reached her lips, "Now, Linc, now—"

I carried her into the bedroom. The bed, as usual, was unmade, but this time it was nice. I laid her on the sheet then got out of my own clothes as fast as I could. When I'd carried her in, she still had the panties on, but now they were lying beside her, her legs parted, arms reaching for me, her thighs finding

a rhythm of their own even before I was beside her, then her fingers trailed over my belly, downward, and our hands met at the same place to bring us together and, from there, I got lost in her, the deep warmth of her body, her breasts, the subtleness of her perfume mingled with the smell of sweat, our thighs finding a rhythm that matched—grew, pain—her fingernails digging into my back, faster—lost. A scream! For me—everything. A few seconds that might have been a lifetime.

And then—slowly, sweetly—the descent. Tingling. Warm. Perfume. Sweat.

I lay beside her, and she stayed close to me, running her fingers over my chest. It was still daylight, and I could see her clearly. Like a cat. A sleek, contented cat. She lay on her back and stretched, arms high over her head, then, suddenly, relaxed.

She sat up, propped a pillow behind her then leaned back and looked down at me. "Linc Keller," she whispered. She ran her fingers through my hair—gently, this time. I reached up and touched her breasts, then down, over her belly—down to where her legs met, and that was where my hand rested. She closed her eyes and covered my hand with hers. "Yes, Linc—again. But not now. I have to call Sandra and Howie—about the contract to sell the house back to you. You see, I am going to try. I'm not going to ask you for any favors. I can't—not now. Now it would make me—well, something I'm not."

Slowly, she got out of bed, and watching her move, I could feel myself wanting her all over again. She picked up her panties then walked into the livingroom, still naked. She gathered her clothes and went into the bathroom. About a minute later, I heard the shower running.

When she came out, she was dressed and the ends of her hair were slightly damp. "Linc—tonight. I want to see Howie and Sandra. I think there'll be a better chance if I talk to them in person. It should be over by eight, but give me until nine. Pick me up a little after nine." She gave me the address.

"Thought you didn't want to be seen with anybody who wasn't a gentleman."

Her voice was serious. "Linc, I don't know how long this is going to last—between us, but while it does, I'm not going to mess it up by worrying about it. I want to have drinks with you—in cocktail lounges. I want to have dinner with you—out and in. I want to cook for you. But most of all, I want to be with you. And Lord knows, I want to go to bed with you. Often."

I looked at her for a long minute. Her face was in shadow now, and my body kept remembering her body. But it was more than that. I—hell, I *liked* her. I cared. I don't know how much, I only know I cared about her, and the feeling was good. "Jean—with us—with me, at

least, it's more than the sex."

"And with me," she whispered. She came over to the bed and kissed me good bye. I didn't want to let go of her.

CHAPTER FIVE

I set the alarm for eight fifteen, then fell asleep. When it went off, I was groggy, but a cold shower had me awake again. I dressed, hesitated, then grabbed a jacket. Maybe we could go someplace for a couple of drinks.

On my way out, I noticed the injunction still lying on the coffee table. Hell, the whole thing was insane.

My watch said ten after nine when I climbed out of the cab in front of the apartment building where she lived. It was prewar, elevator, on East Seventy-Eighth Street, and the quietness of the neighborhood compared to the same hour in the Village was striking.

There was a short entranceway between the door to the street and the one leading to the lobby. I rang her bell. The answering buzz sounded about two seconds after I noticed the hand lettered sign on the door leading to the lobby: FLOOR BEING REPAIRED. PLEASE USE BASEMENT ENTRANCE.

I tried to look inside, but there were curtains on the door and the lights were dim.

I walked back to the street.

Funny she hadn't said anything about it—the floor, and she'd even pushed the buzzer to let me in through the regular entrance.

Oh hell, she'd probably forgotten. Or maybe, when she saw me, she hadn't even known. Apparently she'd spent most of the day sitting on the floor outside my apartment.

I found the basement entrance and pushed open the door. A single lightbulb lit the way towards the elevator, casting sharp shadows into the laundry room. There were two other corridors, pitch black. Great setup for a mugging, for crissake. They should have had all of it well lit.

I stepped inside—slowly, nerves taunt.

Then I decided I was being ridiculous. Seeing ghosts because I'd been shot at.

I let go of the door to the street behind me, and it closed automatically.

Carefully, I walked to the elevator.

But not carefully enough. I'd pushed the button when the light suddenly snapped out to the sound of a wall switch being flipped.

I swung around, but the place was black—*really* black.

Then I heard it—the sound of somebody nearby breathing hard with tension and excitement, trying to control the sound and not succeeding. Who, damnit, *who?* Was it *me* they wanted—or just anybody who happened along? But if it was

me, there was only one way they could have known I'd be here—*Jean!*

My stomach was crawling. Then I figured—yell. Why not? As far as the cops would know, I was just a guy picking up his girl and somebody tried to rob me. Somebody with a switchblade or a gun, no doubt—if it was me they were after. I just couldn't picture whoever had tried this morning not at least making that much of an effort this time.

Slowly, I took in a deep breath. And that was when I came to my senses, for crissake. I ducked down, keeping my balance. Unless the guy was a goddamned cat, his advantage over me was small—as long as I didn't tell him exactly where I was by yelling cop.

He held his breath and I did the same. A real underwater contest, by golly, and I felt sweat break out all over my body.

I won.

He sounded like his lungs were ready to explode, and I made a dive in that direction. Then I was holding cloth—a man's suit jacket. The elevator shaft started to hum. Apparently someone on an upper floor had been holding the car and just let go.

Hands—head—a man—something cold and sharp sliced into my face, and the sudden flood of warmth told me I was bleeding.

I lashed out—and barely touched him, but at least I knew where he was long enough to bring my knee up where his groin should have been. Close—close enough for him to let out a yowl, and in almost the same second, his fist slammed into what he probably figured was my stomach, only it was my chest. It hurt—like hell, and I lost my grip on him. But I was okay. I could still breathe.

The elevator hum got louder, and both of us must have realized together that it was almost to the basement. And with the elevator, there'd be light through the glass window on the door.

A fast scuffle said he was on his way out, but the elevator was faster and I got a back view of him just in time to lite into a flying tackle.

We landed on the damp cement, my head cushioned by his legs. His head was cushioned by nothing and landed with a sharp crack. I'd never heard a man really scream before, and it curled up my back—grotesque—stark!

Plenty of light. The whole corridor was almost as clear as before he'd switched out the bulb when I first came in.

He kept moaning, hanging onto his head. I half-dragged, half-shoved him over to the elevator.

I yanked open the door and pushed him inside so I could get a really good look.

My mouth fell open and stayed that way.

I'd never even seen a picture of him, but I knew who he was. His hair was red. His eyes met mine

with the stunned gaze of a terrified animal—blue eyes. Blue eyes, red hair, finely-chiseled features.

He was a masculine version of Jean.

"You're Howard," I began quietly, still not quite believing it, "—the old man's son."

"What are you going to do?"

I had about twenty pounds on him. What the hell? I loosened my grip. "What I want to know, is *why*. For a lousey piece of property, for crissake? For that senile old man's wifey-come-home fixation? WHY? WHAT THE HELL IS ENOUGH FOR SOMEONE LIKE YOU TO KILL A MAN??"

He turned his face away from me, and all of a sudden something inside me exploded. My hand smashed across his face. "Why? WHY? Again—again. There was blood in the corner of his mouth, and he yelled, *"My God, he couldn't help it! He needed the money for gambling debts. They would have killed him. She wouldn't have helped him—if he'd told her, she'd have left him!"*

"Huh?"

He looked about ready to pass out and I shifted my grip to keep him on his feet.

It was a mistake. His fist slammed into my stomach, and by the time I could breathe again, he was gone—down the corridor and into the street.

I started after him, then figured to hell with it. He'd be easy enough for the cops to pick up.

I steadied myself on the rail of the car, breathing hard. There was blood on my shirt, but at least it wasn't still flowing. Maybe the cut wasn't as bad as I'd thought.

I slammed my fist against the button for six. Apartment 6E.

Jean Berkley!

Nice try, sweetheart. "A" plus for effort. I pictured that soft, sensual body, remembered the taste of her, the smell of her. How unbelievably, how incredibly stupid! The oldest gimmick in the world—a beautiful woman.

But damnit, it still didn't make sense. Okay, they wanted the house back. So fight me in the courts. Even physically threaten me but *kill* me? *Why?*

I walked to the door of her apartment and rang the bell. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe— she *hadn't* known—maybe there was some kind of perfectly logical explanaton.

Yeah and maybe there really was a Santa Claus, too.

She opened the door, wearing a black, square-neck fitted dress and a single strand of blue summer-beads. I'd never dreamed she could look so beautiful.

If I'd really had any doubts on whether she was in on it, her face answered them. Stark shock. Fear. She even drew back a step.

I walked in and closed the door behind me.

When she found her voice, it was good. Oh, it was very very good. "Linc! You're bleeding. I'll get a doctor!"

"Oh, I wouldn't want you to put yourself to any more trouble on my account, Honey."

Again, she backed away from me."Linc, what is it? What's wrong?"

I smiled. And then I smashed my hand across her face, knocking her off balance.

It stunned her—but not for long. She pulled herself up tall and straight, and this time, there were even tears in her eyes. But not in her voice. Her voice was tough—like when she'd delivered the injunction. "I will give you exactly five seconds," she began quietly, "to tell me what the hell this is all about, and then I am going to start screaming as loud and hard as I can."

"Yeah, I'll bet. You'd like that, wouldn't you, Honey—cops all over the place. But just for the record, your brother doesn't by any chance drive a this-year's Chevy, does he?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. What about it?"

"And when was the last time you saw him?"

"Tonight. Why?"

"And of course you told him I'd be arriving a little after nine?"

"Linc, I am not going to play twenty questions with you—"

"You did tell him I'd be here—"

"Of *course* I told him." Again, the tears were back—and this time, they were in her voice too. "Linc, will you please let me—at least get some water and clean it for you. And a bandage. Or else get out, damn you! You *are* crazy, do you know it? You're not only a bastard, you're one hundred per cent psycho. Now get out—*get out!!*"

I hesitated. Lord, it would have been easy to believe her—maybe because I still wanted to. From the moment she'd opened the door—

And that was the memory that stopped me. The fear. The dead man who wasn't dead.

"I have a much better idea," I answered drily, "Why don't you call the cops. You tell them all about it, okay? You tell the cops why your face went chalk white when you saw me standing in the hall."

Her mouth fell open—then snapped shut, tight. "The bathroom," she answered evenly—finally, "is at the end of that hall. Go in and turn on the light—and take a good look at yourself! *Go on*. Tell me how *you'd* react if you opened a door and saw something like that."

About two minutes later, I had to admit she had a point. The dirt from the cellar floor was mingled with blood. I was scraped, scratched, bruised, filthy, there was a small cut on my cheek from the knive and my lower lip was split.

I ran some cold water, grabbed

some soap and washed. I think the soap hurt more than anything else that evening.

When I looked again in the mirror, at least it was an improvement.

I snapped off the light and walked out again.

She was seated on the couch, smoking a cigarette and her hands shook.

"Jean," I offered quietly, "for whatever it's worth—and I don't imagine very much, I'm sorry."

"Yes," she answered quietly. "I'm sorry too.""

CHAPTER SIX

I waited. Hoped, maybe. Then I started for the door.

"Linc—"

"Yeah?"

She stood up and let out a deep breath. "I was trying to call you. I need a key to the house. Daddy's nurse called about a quarter to nine and said he was gone. Before we call the police, I want to try the house. I suspect he probably had more than one set of keys."

"Your brother was dead set against selling it back to me, right?"

She looked surprised, then shrugged her shoulders and nodded.

"Yeah, that's what I figured. Okay. You don't have to."

She froze. Then, slowly, "Okay. I accept. Any strings?"

It got under my skin. "If you mean do you have to keep going to bed with me, no. You didn't *have* to this evening—remember?"

The color in her cheeks deepened. "May I have the key?"

"I haven't got it with me—it's back at the apartment. Shall I drop it off here or meet you at the building? Or do you want to come with me while I get it?"

"I'll go with you," she answered evenly.

We got a cab.

I sat beside her and kept my voice low. "Jean, you're probably going to be convinced I'm psycho, but I'm going to tell you something because I want you to hear it from me. Your brother tried to kill me."

Apparently it *did* convince her I was psycho. She didn't say anything, she just stiffened—and moved away from me, ever so slightly.

I went on. "And I'm going to the police. Maybe the world would not exactly clothe itself in black if I stopped breathing, but there are moments when I enjoy being alive and I want to hang on to those moments. You see, I don't know *why* he tried to kill me, I only know he's tried it twice."

This time, she reached out and closed her hand over mine. "Linc, I'm sorry. God, I'm so sorry—"

"You mean you're sorry I'm—sorry I 'have psychological problems'?"

She hesitated, then let go of my

hand, sat back and closed her eyes. "I've never lied to you. Yes."

She held the cab while I ran up and got the keys. I also changed my shirt.

The night was full of surprises. When we reached the house, a crowd was gathered on both sides of the street with two police cars parked in front of the store. A tall cop in his mid-forties was trying to clear the street and not having much luck, "On your way, lady—beat it, kid—nothing to see—go on home—"

She looked at me, and there was fear in her eyes. We shoved our way to the front of the crowd, then headed for the store.

"Woah there, buddy—" It came from the cop.

"I own the building." I nodded towards Jean. "This is the former owner's daughter. What happened?"

His guard relaxed. "Go on in."

The lights in the store were burning, but most of the activity seemed to come from the basement. The whole place smelled musty and damp.

We were almost to the cellar stairs when she stopped, abruptly.

I waited.

She took a deep breath, then kept going but her face was chalk white. Another cop tried to stop us, and I gave him the same own-the-building-bit.

The door in the basement was different; like freshly-turned earth, but there was something unclean about it. Hell, maybe it wasn't just an odor—maybe it was the whole atmosphere.

A guy in a white coat stood several feet away from us and I wondered whether he was a regular doctor or a medical examiner. There were also a couple of guys in cheap suits who were obviously cops. A flash camera exploded several times near the center of the room, but the stacks of furniture made it hard to tell what his subject was.

The second cop who'd stopped us went over to one of the plainclothesmen and I guess he was talking about me because the guy nodded for me to come over and called, "Let the girl stay where she is."

I started towards him. Another cop was talking to the second plainclothesman, and Jean heard them. "Yeah, me and Pete got the call. A noise complaint. Apparently it was the old guy chopping through the cement. Heart attack?"

I turned back, towards Jean—fast. Her eyes filled with tears, and she looked like a little kid, lost and helpless. Then both of us were looking at the same thing—the withered, grub-like corpse on the floor beside the piled, cracked blocks of cement and freshly-turned earth—and although I'd never seen him before, I knew this was—or had been, Howard Berkley.

"Can't they at least cover him?" she whispered.

"They will," I answered quietly. "They have to take pictures."

She shook her head like she still couldn't believe it. "Why?" she whispered, "Why did he do it? He was an old man. He—" She broke off, then took a couple of steps over to where he'd been digging. I was beside her.

If I'd been in front of her—if I'd known what was there, maybe I could have stopped her from seeing. I know I would have at least tried.

At first, I don't think the whole thing penetrated. At first, all she saw was the horror.

I think the rest of it came to both of us in about the same second. She looked at me, and all of a sudden her whole body went limp. I moved my arm around her back—fast, keeping her on her feet.

No wonder Howard Berkley hadn't wanted this house torn down. No wonder he'd come here tonight—desperately, insanely. How long had the son known? Probably only recently, and since he'd been the one who nixed the re-sale contract, he was probably the only one who knew. The old man must have been frantic to tell him. The son and Jean had both checked with Black and my sister. They both knew I already had another buyer and the son must have figured that since he could never compete with a developer on price, the only way to get it back—to keep his sisters and everyone else from ever finding out, was to get it from my fountain-of-kindness sister—after she'd inherited it.

The ring was lying in the dirt—gold, with three small diamonds. The ring Jean had described to me—her mother's ring, identical to her father's. There were bones beside it—all around it, and the son's words came flooding back to me, *He needed the money for gambling debts. They would have killed him. She wouldn't have helped him—if he'd told her, she would have left him.*

Time had destroyed whatever Mrs. Howard Berkley's features had been, but the knife half-way down her left rib cage was clear and untarnished.

Then one of the plainclothesmen was talking to me. Questions. "She's his daughter. He disappeared, and she was worried about him—thought he might have come here. Called me for the keys. My face? Oh—I got mugged. Cops? No—didn't seem it would do much good—he got away. No, I didn't even get a look at him."

Jean told them her lawyer would call and make whatever arrangements had to be made about the old man.

I carried her up the stairs, and then walked out onto the street. The crowd was still there—even bigger. Too bad somebody didn't just tell them what happened—maybe then they would go home.

Jean stopped for a second and took a couple of deep breaths like

she couldn't quite get enough air. Then—finally, while we were waiting for a cab, "Okay. You're not crazy. You thought I was in on it with Howie, didn't you?"

"At first."

"Thanks—for not turning him in. He's six years older than I am. I guess he remembers her. I don't —not really. But I imagine if I did —well, I might go a little haywire too—at first."

"I still want to talk to him. I've got to be sure—that there'd never be any reason for him to try again."

She nodded.

We got a cab, settled down in the back seat and I gave the driver her address.

Humidity still clung to the city, thick and warm, but at least the heat of the day was gone.

Jean spoke without looking at me. "Linc—I don't want the building back. Not now. Matter of fact, I'd like to see it torn down." Her voice shook. "I'd like to forget it ever existed."

My heart was pounding, and the palms of my hands were suddenly damp. Howie sure as hell wasn't going to fight it now. And Sandra apparently never felt very strongly about it one any way or the other.

One hundred and fifty thousand bucks! *Mine!*

"You mean I can just tear up the injunction?"

"I'll say I never delivered it."

I closed my eyes. "Thanks."

She smiled, drily. "The money still matters to you, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"Just how much do you stand to make?"

I grinned. "A lot."

She laughed. "Still the sharp operator, huh?"

I shrugged.

She moved close against me, laid her head on my shoulder then lifted my hand onto her breast.

DEATH IN THE MIRROR

BY

LEE

RUSSELL

He loomed up from out of her past . . . and she was trapped.

FIFTH AVENUE passed somber and quiet in the blue September evening just turning cool. The breeze, entering the cab, billowed Janice's green silk coat and stirred her hair but did not ease the nagging pull between her eyes of something overlooked or forgotten. Something shouted for recognition. Paul, making mysteries, was taking her uptown, to her and Anne's walkup, to give her her birthday present. He reached to stub out his cigaret and the pull between her eyes vanished. To the left of the ashtray, inset into the back of the front seat, there were three char marks in the upholstery, and these she clearly saw not only in this cab now but also in the cabs ridden from the matinee to the around-Manhattan boat and from the boat to Enrico's in the Village.

Furthermore, while the hack license picture showed a round, startled-looking, middle-aged face, the driver's oddly-tilted rearview mirror showed a young, arrogant mouth faintly smiling. The cab swung past the Pulitzer fountain

and the bronze General Sherman on his bronze horse and into Central Park's East Drive. The dark trees closed in. Paul pulled her to him and she whispered her discoveries.

"Driving for a sick friend," he suggested quietly. "And burns are burns. We couldn't have hailed the same cab three times running."

The cab sped on in a stream of cars and cabs past the intermittent headlights of the opposing stream and the faint mirrored smile seemed to grow. The cab turned, and at the park exit the light flashed red. The driver braked, a 1940's sedan, containing three boys in zip-front jackets, pulled alongside, and Janice's small bag slid to the floor. She and Paul both reached for it and her heart thudded then sped up into a frightening racing as, in the rear-view mirror, she saw Bill Elgard's wide forehead and light eyes.

Bill Elgard, the spectre from her post-college, beatnic fling. Briefly she saw again that smoke-hazy basement "pad" that Bill's well-to-do parents knew nothing about, and Bill, toying with his knife, and herself and her sister, Anne, lounging on the sagging couch as Stephen walked in. Anne had been his girl. Stephen had said, "I'm taking you home, Anne," and, unarmed and shorter than Bill, he had never had a chance. The fight had been over—Bill gone and Stephen beyond help on the cement floor—before she or Anne had even screamed. She had got Anne home and their father, after phoning the police anonymously, had rushed them to Penn Station and onto a train for their aunt's in Pittsburgh. Bill, underage, able to register baby-innocence on his normally arrogant face and with top legal talent for him and no witnesses against him, had been sent only to a minimum-security correction farm.

The light flashed green. The cab shot across Central Park West. Her and Anne's flight, their hiding, their taking an uptown apartment and communicating with their parents only by phone had come to this: Paul had given their address on entering the cab.

Cool air rushed in through the windows. The cab crossed Columbus Avenue, crossed Amsterdam, plunged downhill and turned, and she and Paul were riding among the cars, lights and people of upper Broadway but only a few blocks from her unfrequented street where a carpeted but shadowy and usually deserted stairway led up to her sixth-floor apartment. Immediately ahead was the huge, brilliantly-lit drugstore to which she and Anne sometimes phoned for hamburgers.

"I have to buy asperin," she said.

"Driver, stop here!" Paul called, and the surprise or his tone of authority did it. The cab pulled to the curb.

"Want me to get it?"

"No," she said. "I need other things, too."

She pushed through the revolving door. To her right, teenagers were clustered at the soda fountain. She started past counters of brightly-colored goods toward the glass phone booths to her left, then saw that through the vase, glass storefront, Bill could see every move she made. She escaped back to the cosmetic counters and the bespectacled, white-coated, drug clerk brushed by the orange-haired cosmetic girl to wait on her.

"Your sister's not with you tonight?"

"No."

She could still be seen from the street. Bill, alerted, would walk off and try again another night—a knife slipped into a simple, fire-escape window fastening. Beside the cash register lay a stack of order blanks and a pencil on a string. Screening her hands behind a nail polish display, she wrote: "Phone police. Cab driver outside escaped prisoner. Be careful. He can see us." and turned the paper to face the clerk.

His eyes widened behind his glasses. Further along the counter a stout lady was buying pink cleansing tissues. A thin man mock-leered through a pair of harlequin sunglasses at a laughing girl. The clerk glanced toward the street, smiled tentatively, then widely and turned the order form face down.

"Now, what can I *really* do for you?"

"Asperin," she said.

He wrapped the small bottle, she handed him money, the amount was rung up, and she stood holding her change. A motor started up outside. She whirled about, but the cab with Bill and Paul in it, was still there. She caught at the counter with both hands.

"Something wrong?"

Wordlessly, she indicated the note.

"You mean this is on the level?"

She opened her lips but no sound came.

The clerk glanced again toward the huge window front. "Well, why didn't you say so?"

He rang "no sale", summoned the orange-haired cosmetic girl and, below counter level, handed her the note and a dime. He pushed her hands down, and, mouthing the words, she read.

"You kidding?"

"Nobody's kidding. Now use that acting ability we're always hearing about and make like you're phoning your boy friend."

The girl shrugged, pulled cigarets and matches from an under-counter shelf and walked toward the phones. Janice, holding the bottle of asperin in its twist of green paper, stared at pink, blue and white jars but saw only Paul out in that cab with Bill and Anne home in what she still thought of as their safe apartment.

The orange-haired girl came back and said, "I think you're nuts and *they* think *I* am."

"But they're coming?" Janice asked.

"Yeah, sure. They're coming." The girl turned smiling to a customer. "May I help you, Madame?"

Janice had said she had other things to buy. Her glance stopped on the flowered dusting powder boxes in the lower counter case.

"Do you have *Chancon des Fleurs?*"

Taking his cue, the male clerk said slowly, *"Chancon des Fleurs, Chancon des Fleurs.* I don't think so but let me see. Elaborately casual he fumbled about in the case then began setting pastel boxes up onto the counter. "No, but we have some other fine fragrances."

He suggested this brand and recommended that fragrance. The whole brilliantly-lit drugstore looked two-dimensionally unreal. Janice turned to look outside and saw a jacketed boy move from the front cab window. Paul's hand lay white on the rear window frame.

A dark sedan pulled up four car lengths behind the cab. Her hands left the round and square boxes. Of course. The police would know that a cruise car would precipitate Bill's flight. She hurried toward the revolving door, intending, by suggesting a soda, to get Paul out of harm's way before those two large men jumped from their sedan and ran to the cab.

She stepped out into the cool night and into the sheet of drugstore light that fell across the sidewalk. Paul was watching; Bill, alert and still, apparently not. The two large men still sat in their sedan. She stepped toward the cab, heard a car door slam and double footsteps approach, turned and saw two large men, one carrying a child, push into the drugstore and cross to the soda fountain. Her steps had led her to the cab. Paul, already out, helped her in and got in after her. The cab door slammed. The cab lurched forward, turned and began the short plunge toward the Drive.

Crossing the dark sidewalk to her door, she looked up. No lights on the fifth floor or half of the sixth. Again the janitor had not locked the street door at dusk. As they entered the carpeted foyer, another dark sedan pulled to the curb but she no longer believed in dark sedans. She pulled at Paul's arm and ran.

He caught her at the landing. "Now, what is all this?"

She told him. He gripped her arm and they began to run.

Passing the second floor, she heard the street door open and close below. At the next landing she heard it open and close again. Paul rushed her past the third floor and the fourth and, as they neared the fifth, he said:

"Get out your key. Get inside. And, unless I'm right behind you, slam and bolt the door. Phone the police. And if Anne has any company, send him out."

"Paul, he *always* has a knife."

Paul gave her a shove. "Now, run!" And hearing only their own pounding steps, they ran up the last flight.

The voice came from behind them. "You can stop right there."

A half flight below, stood Bill, smiling one-sidedly and playing with his knife. Beside and below him, a boy in zip-front jacket stood holding a gun. From the roof stairs stepped two more boys similarly dressed but not visibly armed.

Paul's arm steadied Janice. "I don't know what you think you're up to," he said to Bill, "but you won't get away with it."

Bill weighed his knife in his hand and asked Janice, "Anne home?" The other boy's closed-in face showed no expression and his eyes and the gun never wavered. Bill motioned with his knife and began climbing.

"Well, we'll just have to go in and see."

"Go ahead, Jan." Paul said. "We'll have to take the chance."

She turned and, taking long, fitted the key. No other sound could be heart except Bill's knife clicking shut and open again.

"Stop stalling," he said. "Open up and no screaming and keep your sister quiet, too."

She turned the key, pushed the door and stepped into what should have been her familiar living room. Wrapped presents lay heaped on the coffee table and Anne, in a purple smock, was up on a ladder taping strings of artifical flowers, canopy-fashion, to the ceiling. Her face went white, the ladder tottered and Paul rushed to get her down.

"What's the occasion?" Bill asked.

"My birthday," Janice said.

"I don't like this," one of the boys from the roof said.

"You checked the roof doors all around?" Bill ased. The boy nodded. "Out and up, then." Bill motioned again with his knife.

Insolently, he went first. The boy with the gun herded them toward the roof and the two unarmed boys followed.

Bill looked back. "Quite the ladies, now, aren't you? I can remember when—"

"That's enough," Paul said.

"You keep quiet, Jack," Bill advised him. "So far I've nothing against you, but don't tempt me."

They stepped out into the cool night air and stood half-silhouetted against the red-black city night sky. Bill's knife closed. "Now over by that rear fire escape."

But three roofs away, a man stepped from the stairway, lit a cigaret and crossed to lean on the front parapet. Bill motioned them back against the structure housing the top stairway landing. The distant man gazed at the sky and moved to a side parapet. All four boys watched. Anne, coatless, was shivering.

The distant man moved again and, taking advantage of the distraction, Janice slipped her hand

into her tiny bag and slid her lipstick from its case. This time she would, at least, place the label. Reaching back to the stairway door, she scrawled largely, "Bill Elgard, murderer," as the soft crayon wore down. One of the boys called in a low voice:

"That one's up to something. She's writing or something."

Bill stepped from the housing wall. "Stand aside."

She moved and, in the dim light, what she had written could just be made out, black on gray. She saw fury set Bill's face.

"Rub it out."

The second boy trained his gun directly onto her. The man on the distant roof went back inside.

"Rub."

She got out tissues and began rubbing lightly, then harder as she saw that the thin cellulose shredded while the color only blended more firmly into the rough door.

"That guy's gone," the taller of the unarmed boys said. "Let's cut out."

Bill turned to him. "I'm running this operation."

The boy's arms lifted and dropped back. "I didn't mean anything. It's just—well, you said we'd have some fun. So far where's the fun?"

Bill's knife flicked open again. "Suppose you try a little rubbing. And put some muscle into it."

The unarmed boy shrugged, got out a dirty handkerchief, spit on it and began scrubbing at the door. He kept spitting and rubbing and Janice began to shake with silent laughter.

"Steady," Paul said.

Anne, who had been standing looking pale and blank, turned to look at her sister.

"All right. What's so funny?" Bill asked.

The boy stopped rubbing. "Look, you said they left town that same night. Maybe they didn't turn you in. Let's get out of here. I don't like this."

"What's so funny?" Bill repeated.

"It's indelible," Janice said between gasps. "Water only sets the color more."

"Put that rag away. And you," Bill said to the boy with the gun," get them down and across to the next roof, all but this one." He pulled Anne roughly from the wall. "She's going to pay for her sister's cleverness right now. You," he said to Janice, "I'm going to enjoy taking care of later."

The sound of cars stopping rose to the roof. A voice said, "It's probably nothing but you two go up. Apartment twelve."

Everyone had turned toward the front parapet. The gun also had shifted. Janice, unable to trust her voice but foreseeing that they could be blocks away or even dead while the police still pounded on a door there was no one to open, stepped from the wall, swung her arm and let go of her tiny bag. Paul yelled,

"Get down!" and dove for the boy with the gun. The gun went off and loud voices mixed with the clang as the front fire-escape ladder was pulled down. Bill and the others disappeared down the rear fire escape. Paul picked up the gun.

"Come on," he said. "They may get trapped and have to cut back over this roof." He led them back down to the apartment.

Paul let the police in.

"We got them," the officer in charge said. "Lucky you girls flirt with the drugstore help and order hamburgers sent out but next time put your name and address on any notes to us—okay?"

After they had gone, the doorbell chimed again. Paul reopened the door and three men and two girls, bearing wrapped presents, burst in shouting, "Surprise!"

"Surprise, yourself," Paul said.

They looked at him then said a rather tentative, "Happy birthday" to Janice.

"Yes, it is," she said, "but just don't wish me many happy returns of this day."

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